BLAZING THE AIR TRAIL

JOHN CREASEY

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By
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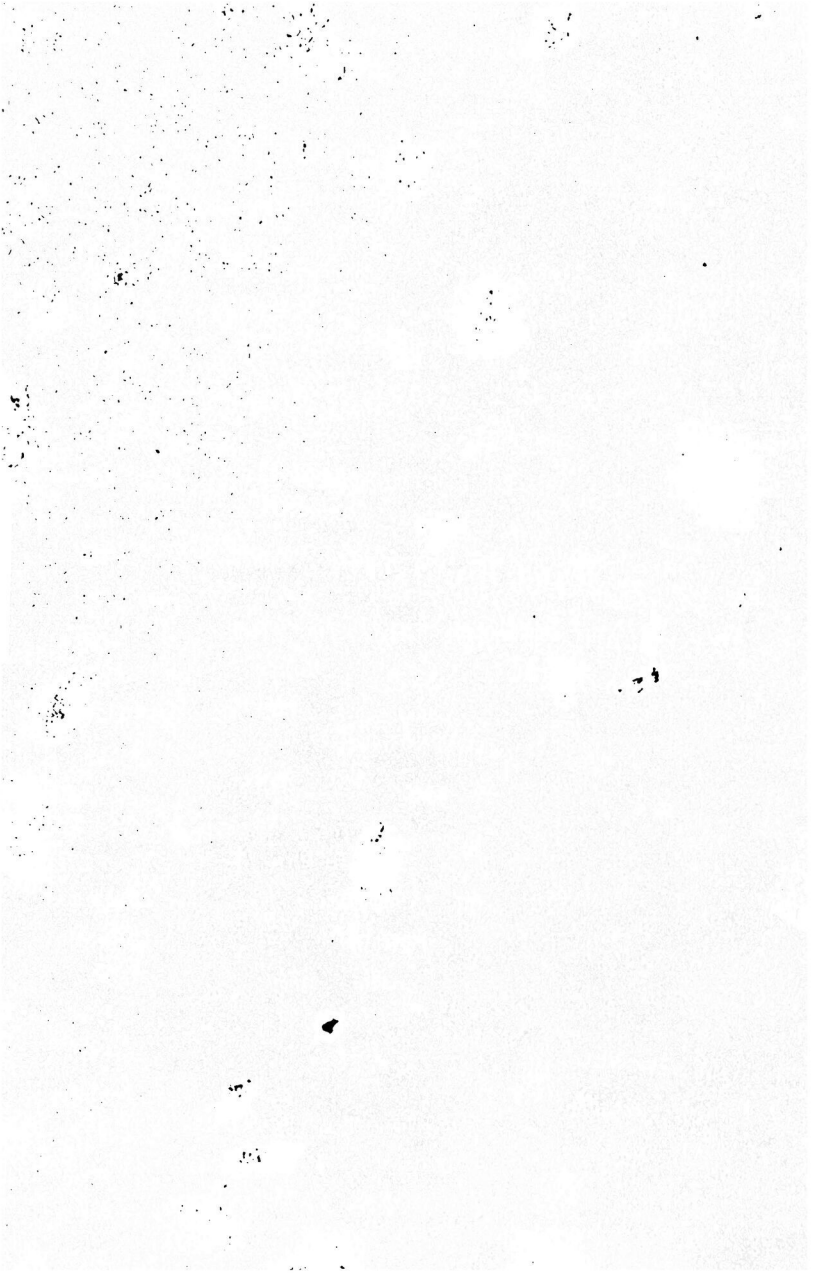


BLAZING THE AIR TRAIL

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST FLIGHT

ALTHOUGH James Lacre had always carried out his duties faithfully, it had frequently amused him to think he was sole guardian to a lad of seventeen. Lacre himself was thirty, and he had led a wholly adventurous life, which had carried with it no more responsibility than the need for looking after himself. But as he had always been prepared to take risks, he was never happy unless he was on some dare-devil scheme that forced him to carry his life in his hands.

The whole world knew of "Lucky" Lacre's exploits.

He had been one of the first men to cross the Atlantic, solo, from East to West, but not satisfied with that he had rested only for twelve hours before starting the return flight. He had reached Ireland, after battling against wind and rain and a rapidly dropping petrol store, and the newspapers had made him a public hero. But hero-worship didn't turn Lucky Lacre's head, nor did it stop him from other great attempts to break flying records. He had been second in the great round the world air race, he had flown to Australia and

back in fifteen days. All the time, however, he was looking for greater speeds, more reliable 'planes.

Such was the man who was guardian to Peter Grey.

Peter's parents had died when he was a boy, and he hardly remembered them. Until he was twelve he had been looked after by an aged aunt; from his twelfth birthday to his seventeenth he had been at Raeside School, spending his holidays with his famous uncle—Lucky Lacre.

His uncle had always arranged to be in England during the holidays, and they had had many wonderful times together. Both of them loved walking, and they had toured most of England, including the beautiful country of Devon and Cornwall, the rocky heights of North Wales and the highlands of Scotland. They knew the highways and byways, and in their walks they had become fast friends.

But for some reason, James Lacre had never talked much of his flights, and he had never let Peter go up.

There is danger in the air, and the more experienced an airman is, the more he realises it. James Lacre did not want to feel he was putting his ward in danger, and he did nothing to encourage the lad to think of flying.

He was so generous in other ways to Peter that the lad hesitated to talk of going up. He guessed there was a good reason for his uncle's silence, and although sometimes they talked of the adventures Lucky Lacre had had, they

never actually broached the subject of Peter learning to pilot an aeroplane. But deep down in his heart Peter Grey had a tremendous admiration for his uncle's bravery, and he longed to feel the exhilaration of a flight, longed to be above the ground, to watch the towns and villages beneath him like little grey blots on the green countryside. And he had a secret desire to emulate his uncle, to do the things he had done, to accompany him on one of the great record-breaking flights.

Soon after his seventeenth birthday, Peter Grey left Raeside for the last time. He travelled with the other lads to London, and as he expected, he found his uncle waiting for him at Paddington Station.

Jim Lacre was a tall, lean, brown-faced man, whose grey eyes were bright and always smiling. He was dressed that morning in July in a light grey suit that fitted him perfectly. His hair was ruffled a little by the wind, for he rarely wore a hat.

Peter saw him immediately, shouted good-bye to his school friends, few of whom he would ever see again—he had, of course, shaken hands all round with them in the carriage—and hurried to his uncle.

"Well, young fellow!" exclaimed Lacre, as they shook hands. "By Jove! You're looking as fit as a fighting-cock."

It was true. A love of open air had tanned Peter's face, and strengthened his muscles. He was physically fit—and he was considerably stronger than many men years older than he.

He was always ready to smile, and his eyes were grey and bright, like his uncle's.

"I'm feeling fine," he said, as they stood for a moment looking at each other, as old friends always will. "It's awfully decent of you to meet me, Uncle."

"Pooh," said the other, "did you think I was going to miss you on a day like this? I've planned out an afternoon at Lords, Peter, and then perhaps a play this evening—if you don't feel too fagged. Think you'll enjoy it?"

"Won't I just!" exclaimed Peter, his eyes glistening.

"Come on then," said James Lacre. "We'll lunch at the first place we come to, and then get along to Lords. Better park your luggage at the cloak-room. We can collect it later. If we don't hurry we'll miss some of the after-lunch play."

Everything with James Lacre was like that—it had to happen quickly. He was never satisfied if he was doing nothing, and he would never allow time to drag. Peter thoroughly enjoyed the rest of that day, and although the morning train journey had been tiring, he forgot all about his fatigue, and went with his uncle with alacrity. They didn't talk much. Both of them loved cricket, and they saw Patsy Hendren score a hundred, between lunch and tea, and afterwards they saw a fine piece of bowling by the Nottinghamshire fast merchants.

Peter, himself a fast bowler, watched the smooth action of the famous professionals with fascination. They seemed to put no effort into

their bowling, but the ball whizzed down the pitch almost too fast for the eye to see.

"Pretty good, eh?" asked James Lacre, as they left the ground at half-past six. "Think you'll ever be able to trundle like that, Peter?"

"Goodness, no!" said Peter. "They're more like magicians than cricketers. Hendren's was a good knock, wasn't it?"

"He never does waste time," said the other. "Well, supposing we go to the flat, have a wash, and then go out to an early dinner and the show we talked about. Fit for it?"

"You just try me!" exclaimed Peter.

It was nearly twelve o'clock before they reached James Lacre's flat, after the musical comedy that night, and Peter was too tired to think about what was going to happen afterwards. But James Lacre sat in his armchair, smoking, and wondering what was the best thing to do with the lad.

He didn't like the idea of sending Peter into a boarding-house, although he couldn't see anything else for it. Peter had very few relations, and none of them were willing to look after him.

"Not that he won't be able to look after himself," said James Lacre, to himself. "He's a great kid. And"—he chuckled aloud—"I'll bet he won't like going into an office. Still, I'll talk to him in the morning."

With that, the famous airman went to bed. As always, he slept well, and in the next room Peter Grey was sleeping the sleep of the just. Peter's last school day had come and gone.

He was going to face the world, now, and he had no idea what was in front of him.

. . . . .

"Well, young 'un," said James Lacre, as they finished breakfast next morning. "You're not a school-boy any longer. What are you going to do with yourself?"

Peter didn't answer at once. He smiled, a little awkwardly.

"Any great ideas?" chuckled his uncle. "Don't be afraid of talking about 'em, Peter."

"I suppose, really, you've got everything worked out for me," said Peter, flushing a little.

James Lacre laughed.

"Goodness, young 'un, I'm not a wizard. True, I've got several friends who will take you into their offices, but I'd like first to hear what *you* think about it."

Peter took a deep breath. It was funny how awkward it had always been to talk about flying with Uncle Jim. But it was now or never. He wouldn't get a chance to discuss it again, like this, so he said quickly:

"I don't want to go into an office, Uncle. I'd rather try and get work at—at an aerodrome. I've always wanted to be able to fly. I wouldn't mind starting at the bottom, of course——"

James Lacre stopped smiling. He said seriously:

"You mean that, Peter? If you had a chance, would you take a job as an assistant

mechanic, say, at an aerodrome? It's dirty work, you know, and you don't get much fun out of it. Then if you ever did get a chance of going up much, you'd probably find you suffered from air-sickness. Some people *can't* fly, you know."

Peter laughed. He was immensely relieved that his idea hadn't been ruled out immediately.

"I'd take a chance on that," he said. "Could you arrange anything for me, Uncle? I don't mind what the job is——"

James Lacre nodded, and smiled again.

"Yes," he said. "I can fix something, Peter. Like to come along to Heston, this morning? I keep my 'plane there."

"I'd love to," cried Peter.

As they made their way to Heston, in James Lacre's small car, his uncle spoke seriously to Peter. He told him he had never talked much about flying, because he hadn't wanted to influence his nephew in any way.

"If you really want to fly," he said, "nothing will stop you, and now you're starting a different life, it's only fair you should have a chance. But remember this, young fellow. I can get you a job at Heston, but you'll have to work for yourself. You can't keep that kind of job because you're my nephew."

"I shan't want to," Peter assured him. He added, a little nervously. "I think I know a bit about aeroplanes, Uncle. I've studied a lot of books, and in my last year at school I was in the Mechanics section. I'm not a duffer at it."

"Good lad!" said James Lacre. "That's the spirit."

Ten minutes later they were at the aerodrome.

James Lacre didn't say anything about it, but he was watching Peter's reaction carefully. He had been more than delighted to hear the lad had been thinking seriously of flying as a career. It proved Peter's words that morning had not been spoken on the spur of the moment. And in his heart, the man believed Peter would do well.

It wasn't altogether mechanical knowledge that made a good pilot. Of course, a man had to know just how to handle the controls to the exact fraction of a minute, and he had to be able to tap out messages on the small wireless set with which the 'planes were equipped. But the same knowledge was wanted for driving a car, and piloting was a very different matter.

James Lacre knew just what was wanted. To make a good pilot, you had to have nerves of steel, you had to be able to think and act like lightning, for the slightest loss of time might easily send the machine you were flying crashing to the ground. There was a "something" needed in men and lads who took to the air for their livelihood, or their sport. They had to be tinged with that daredevilry that had made James Lacre so famous. You had to be prepared to take a chance, and yet you had to be ultra-careful while you were at the controls.

Lacre knew some men, experienced pilots, who had never really been on top of their jobs. They were liable to fail in a sudden emergency,

although they had all passed the stringent tests necessary to obtain a pilot's certificate. On the other hand, he knew many youngsters who had taken to the air as a duck takes to water. Far back in the war days, youths with only a few hours of flying experience had handled their machines like hardened veterans. Practice made perfect; but to fly you had to have a love of the air born in you. It was the same thing that had been in the blood of olden-day pioneers, of the men who had sailed the seas in the days of Drake and the Spanish Armada. It was a longing for adventure, a carelessness of danger, and a grim determination to succeed.

Had Peter those qualifications?

James Lacre believed the lad had, but he wanted to prove it. And there was no better way of testing his nerve than by leaving him at the aerodrome, to work as an assistant to the mechanics and to learn all the intricacies of the machines. It was well known that many mechanics would not go up in a 'plane. They knew how much depended on a single screw, and they felt safer on the ground.

Would six months' training here kill Peter's desire to fly?

Well, the six months would show. Meanwhile James Lacre was going to do what he knew Peter was longing for.

He left Peter outside the aerodrome manager's office, and came out ten minutes later, carrying a leather coat, a helmet and a pair of goggles.

"Come on, young 'un," he said with a smile.

Peter's eyes glistened.

"You mean we're going up?"

"Just for a short flight," said his uncle. "We'll go up in my 'bus. You can get into your coat as we walk there."

In five minutes, Peter Grey was stepping into an aeroplane for the first time in his life.

He was trembling, not with nervousness but with excitement. For on the body of the great machine—it was a monoplane—the black letters of its registration number were painted, and the magic words:

"*The Pioneer.*"

This very 'plane, painted grey with lines of red along the wings, the body and the tail, had flown hundreds of thousands of miles, with James Lacre at the controls—alone. It had crossed uncharted seas, flown over mountains whose summits had never been reached by man, across great stretches of desert—the most dangerous places for aircraft, for there was always the risk of terrible sandstorms that reached thousands of feet into the sky. The *Pioneer!* Millions of people had waited, breathlessly, for news of that wonderful 'plane, and its daredevil pilot, during its mad rushes from place to place. Half a dozen times it had been forced down, but Lacre had always been able to get it up again. He had been given up for lost a dozen times, but he had always found his way back to civilization, with the *Pioneer* hardly damaged.

Lucky Lacre! No wonder he had earned the nickname.

All these things flashed through Peter's mind as he stepped into the small cabin. There was room for two people besides the pilot, and there were dual-controls. Although small, it was roomier than Peter had expected, and he found the seats surprisingly comfortable.

"They've got to be, when you're sitting in 'em for hours at a stretch," laughed James Lacre, when Peter commented on it. "Sit in the middle seat, Peter. The controls are in front of you. There's the joy-stick—there's altitude—anyhow, you'll learn them all in time. Don't touch anything."

James Lacre climbed into his seat. The door banged. A mechanic in white overalls stood by the gleaming propeller, outside. The muffled cry of a single word "contact!" reached Peter's ears, and he saw the propeller begin to revolve, gathering speed every minute. The engine roared. The propeller went so fast that it was almost impossible to see the blades. It just carved a light brown circle in the air.

"We're off," said James Lacre, with a smile.

The machine moved forward. Its small, tyred wheels ran over the uneven ground for forty or fifty yards, and although Peter could hear them bumping, he hardly felt them. Then, suddenly, the bumping stopped.

They'd left the ground.

Peter Grey never forgot the excitement of that first wonderful flight, he never lost the thrill of the first take-off. The great monoplane went off the ground without a shiver. It was

a smooth, graceful movement, and it didn't seem possible they were actually in the air.

Peter looked over the side.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "We're a long way up!"

"It doesn't take long to leave Mother Earth behind," laughed James Lacre. "Five hundred feet now, Peter, and we're climbing fast. Remember, young 'un, don't lean to the opposite side if we seem to be leaning over. Behave just as you would on the back of a motor-bike going fast."

"I'll remember," said Peter.

Surprise after surprise passed through his mind in that first trip. For one thing, he had expected it to be impossible to hear each other speak, without shouting, but he found the drone of the engine hardly penetrated the cabin—certainly not enough to drown their voices. Again, he had expected the motion to be jerky and had fancied it was necessary to be tied in. He found it wasn't necessary. Safety-belts were fixed, but they were rarely used unless one was flying an "open" 'plane—that is, one without a cabin. Moreover, the motion was wonderfully smooth. For ten minutes they flew, and not once did the machine jerk or bump. Peter was hardly conscious of great speed, although he knew they were travelling well over a hundred miles an hour.

Beneath him, England was stretched out like a vast map.

In the distance he could see the smoking grey mass of London, nearer at hand he could

see smaller towns. Hounslow, Slough and Staines were among them, he knew. Comparatively large places looked like little villages. Cars going at thirty and forty miles an hour along the great ribbons of the roads leading to the West of England seemed to crawl. The fields looked like little pieces of green paper stuck together. Men and beasts were visible, but they looked incredibly tiny.

"Enjoying it?" asked James Lacre.

He looked round, and needed no answer other than Peter's glistening eyes. It was the greatest moment of Peter Grey's life. His old life seemed to be left behind him, like the rest of the world.

It was over all too soon for Peter, but his uncle didn't make the mistake of staying up there too long for the first flight. They returned to Heston in half an hour, and, like the take-off, the landing was perfect. Peter climbed out, laughing and glowing-faced.

"Tummy all right?" asked his uncle.

"Everything's fine," said Peter, enthusiastically.

"That's the talk," said James Lacre. "Now we'll see about fixing you up for apprenticeship, young 'un."

It was two hours later that Peter Grey and his uncle left the aerodrome. Peter was too excited for words. Everything was settled. In a week's time he would start his apprenticeship at Heston. He would live at a house near the flying field, owned by a friend of the manager's, and James Lacre felt satisfied he had been wise in letting him take his choice.

"Just a week's tramping—I think we'll do Surrey," said James Lacre, "and then you can get stuck into it. And this time we'll talk about flying as much as you like!"

"I hardly know how to thank you, Uncle," Peter said.

"Pooh!" laughed James Lacre. "Learn to fly, and make a good job of it. That'll be thanks enough, young 'un."

And Peter determined that nothing would stop him from doing what his uncle wished—and he wished, too.

CHAPTER II

"A" CERTIFICATE

"HERE he comes," said the little Cockney mechanic standing near James Lacre at the Heston aerodrome. "And I reckon 'e'll make a good landing, Mr. Lacre—'e allus does."

"Splendid," said Lucky Lacre.

He stood smiling as the biplane came smoothly towards the earth. He knew that nothing would make an aerodrome mechanic praise a pilot unless that pilot was worth praising, and James Lacre felt proud, and happy.

"Beautiful," he murmured, as the wheels touched the ground. There was not the slightest bump at the moment of contact, and then the biplane jockeyed along, coming to a standstill ten yards from the mechanic and the famous air-pilot. The cabin door opened and Peter Grey's face came into view. Peter was beaming cheerfully. He had filled out in the seven months that had passed since he had first come to Heston, and there was an air of confidence about him as he stepped out of the 'plane and advanced towards his uncle.

"That completes my two hundred hours up," he said with a laugh. "So I'll get my 'A' certificate, Uncle. Jove! I'm looking forward to that!"

"You're a young scamp," said James Lacre. "You must have spent every available minute in the air. But, joking apart, you've done well, Peter. I've been talking to the manager."

Peter's eyes gleamed as he took off his helmet and coat, and watched the mechanics pushing the 'plane into the hangar. It was a fine accomplishment for a seventeen-year-old lad to have flown a total of two hundred hours, solo, and thus qualify for his "A" certificate —which meant he could carry passengers, if he wanted to, and was the hall-mark of a good pilot.

But Peter wasn't vain. He knew he owed a lot to the help he had received from his uncle, and the men at Heston. For he had settled down with the men quickly, and he was justly popular. His eagerness to learn, and his willingness to work hard had had its own reward.

James Lacre had been to India and back, since Peter had last seen him. The *Pioneer* was in its hangar now, having an overhaul, and Lacre had been talking about his nephew to the Heston manager.

He had learned Peter was thoroughly sound in the air, and capable of any normal flying. "He'll make an ace," the manager had said. "You can't spoil the lad, that's what I like about him." The manager, a middle-aged man with years of experience behind him, laughed a little. "And I'll tell you something else, Mr. Lacre. Young Peter's hoping he'll get a chance of going on a long flight with you, soon.

If you don't mind me saying so, I think it would be good for him."

"I'll take him," said James Lacre.

. . . . .

It was just a week later that the final arrangements for the great Round the World Air-race were made, the list of entrants finally sorted out, and the handicaps decided on. In his heart Peter longed for a chance of taking part in it, but he knew it was asking too much to expect an opportunity. He was not old enough to enter a machine himself—and even if he had been his inexperience would have barred him—but the *Pioneer* was entered, of course.

James Lacre had had many alterations made to the engines. New parts had been fitted, an extra petrol tank was built in, giving the wonderful machine a capacity of five thousand miles without re-fuelling. Peter Grey had helped with the work, and a hundred times he had talked to the machine, as if it was a human being.

The race was to start in four days' time, and the newspapers were full of it. Headlines told of the immense difficulties in front of the pilots. The route covered nearly thirty thousand miles, and it was expected that the winner would do 3,000 miles a day—which meant twenty flying hours at a speed of 150 m.p.h.

"Do you think you've got a chance?" Peter asked his uncle.

They were in James Lacre's car, going towards London from Heston. The famous pilot drove

expertly—he was as accomplished on the road as he was in the air.

"Well," he said, "there's a chance for all of us, Peter. Don't forget the best pilots in the world are entered for it."

"I know," said Peter. "I saw Graffhein at Heston to-day, with his *Deutschland*. It's a wonderful 'bus, Uncle."

"And one more likely to get round first than any other," said James Lacre frankly. "It's got the best work of German aero-engineering in it—and the Germans want some beating. And Graffhein himself is a wonderful pilot."

"Do you know him?" asked Peter. "I thought he looked a decent fellow, although I didn't speak to him, of course."

"I know him slightly," said James Lacre, thoughtfully. "He's one of the most popular men, internationally, in the game. But I don't like Ricardo, the Spanish man."

"He hasn't been to Heston," said Peter, "but his photograph was in *Aeroplane* this week. He looks a nasty customer."

"He is, by all accounts," said James Lacre. "And what's more, he's badly in need of money. The prize for this race is no small one——"

"Fifty thousand pounds!" exclaimed Peter, who knew every detail of the coming race. "It's a terrific sum, Uncle."

"I wish it wasn't so big," said James Lacre, and Peter knew he was worried. "Some men will go to any lengths to get money like that, young 'un. Still, we're being foolish! Probably everything will be clean and above board."

He drove in silence for a while. Peter was thinking hard. He wanted to know just what his uncle was doing in the race, for so far there had been no mention of a second pilot for the *Pioneer*, and there was no chance of the winning machine getting in solo. If his uncle really wanted to win—and Peter knew he did—there would have to be a second man. Who?

At last Peter did the thing he always managed—put the question point-blank. He had never been any good at subterfuge, and the same trait in his character made it impossible for him to lie, for a good cause or a bad one. But he did try to make his words sound casual.

"Who's going with you, Uncle?"

For some reason Peter noticed his uncle kept his eyes on the road, and affected to have some trouble with the brake. There was a pause, which ended as James Lacre said:

"Well, I don't know, young 'un. It's going to be a tough job, and if we face it squarely, we know that at least two of the starters won't ever get back. A round the world race is going to cause some smashes, Peter. I honestly think myself that of the twenty 'planes starting, not more than four or five will get back without a serious mishap, and I expect at least five of them just to smash. And a smash means death. It's pretty grim."

Peter Grey nodded. He didn't say he would have risked death a thousand times for the chance of accompanying his uncle in the *Pioneer*, but something of his thoughts showed

in his eyes when James Lacre glanced swiftly at him.

The airman looked away again.

"Young Robertson wants to come with me," he said. "He was behind me in the Australian race, but he's been down with influenza, and he's still a bit groggy. That knocks him out. I haven't much doubt I could get a dozen volunteers, if I wanted 'em," he added with a laugh, "but in the end it will probably be Allen."

Peter said nothing.

He knew Tim Allen, a young man of twenty-five who had done almost as many flights as James Lacre. Allen was a first-class mechanic, an "A" certificate man, a commercial pilot of experience and a long-distance solo flier. He would have entered himself for the race, but his 'plane, the *Red Comet*, had smashed a few weeks before, and was a complete wreck.

"As a matter of fact," said James Lacre, "I'm seeing Allen to-night. Care to come along and have a bite with us?"

"By Jove I would," said Peter. "He's a wonderful flier, Uncle. I saw him coming down in one of those old crocks they've got at Heston, and I was sure he'd smash. He didn't straighten out until he was fifty yards from the ground."

"*Didn't* he?" exclaimed James Lacre. "I didn't think Allen played tricks like that."

"Oh, it wasn't a trick," said Peter quickly. "He was in difficulties——"

Peter didn't understand the reason for his uncle's sudden exclamation. Nor did he know

why, when he glanced at the driver's face, it was set in very grim lines. James Lacre looked angry, and his body was stiff.

What on earth had happened?

"When was this?" snapped James Lacre, in a hard voice.

"Yesterday afternoon," said Peter quickly.

"Know what the trouble was?"

"A locked joy-stick," said Peter, who had examined the airman's machine, after the landing, and had helped to find the trouble. He remembered, suddenly, that although Tim Allen had laughed and joked about his narrow escape, there had been for a few seconds an expression in his eyes that reminded Peter, now, of his uncle's grimness.

"Hmm," said James Lacre at last. "Well, he was lucky, then. But as you say, he's a good man, Peter. I think I'd rather have him with me than anyone else."

Peter's heart sank, but he made no comment. It was absurd to play with the idea that he might have a chance of flying in the World Race. It was even more ridiculous to be disappointed.

Half an hour later, Peter Grey entered the doors of the Pilots' Club for the first time.

He entered as a guest, of course, for the members all consisted of service men, or else pilots who had won fame in record-breaking work. All the members were either young or middle-aged. About them all there was that air of light-heartedness that covered a realization of the danger of the life they led. They

had steady eyes that seemed to be looking into great distances, and without exception the men Peter saw that night looked capable of facing any emergency, any danger.

He realised with a glow of pride the type of men they were. They feared nothing. They were the brotherhood of the air, and none of them knew whether, after their next flight, they would be alive to come here again. Their job wasn't the steady piloting of passenger 'planes, built for reliability and travelling along known routes. They blazed the trail of aviation, the great trail that had been started years before by Bleriot in his queer-looking machine. Then, Bleriot's goal had been to cross the English Channel, now these men had for their goal the ends of the earth, the uncharted wilderness of the skies.

But Peter wasn't allowed to think too much about the club members.

He knew Tim Allen well by sight, and fairly well to talk to, and he knew the pilot for a cheerful young man, always ready to crack a joke. To-night, he was in his best form. Peter was laughing throughout the meal, and he hardly realised when the conversation took a more serious turn.

His uncle and Tim Allen, however, were discussing the coming race, emphasising its dangers. In a strange way that he would hardly admit to himself, Peter was disappointed. He didn't think two great airmen like these would spend their time talking of the hazards of the flight. He knew they would realise them

and take every precaution to avoid trouble, but now they seemed to think of nothing else but the possibility of a crash.

Tim Allen turned to Peter suddenly.

"Well, my budding pilot," he said, "how would you like to take the chances? Bit too much like suicide, eh?"

Peter went red.

"Well—I suppose it is dangerous," he said, "but I'd give my head to go——"

Allen chuckled, James Lacre laid his hand on Peter's arm.

"Mean that, young 'un?"

Peter stared, uncertainly, from one man to the other. He would not let himself think that they were *seriously* discussing this with him.

"Of course I do," he said with a forced laugh.

James Lacre looked at Allen.

"What do *you* think?" he asked.

"Let him come, the young scamp," laughed Allen. "He'll be worth his weight, Jimmy. Thank the Lord he's light. We *need* a third, you know, and a man like Robertson would be too heavy."

Peter Grey listened like a man in a daze. He could hardly believe his good fortune, but at last he understood what had been happening. Tim Allen had been to the Heston aerodrome a lot, secretly to watch him, and to see how he shaped. His uncle had already definitely arranged with Allen to act as co-pilot, but in view of the length of the trip, had decided they needed a third.

And he was going!

CHAPTER III

DELIBERATE DAMAGE

PETER gathered his wits about him at length, and muttered his thanks. The others laughed, and James Lacre said:

"We shall rely on you a lot, young 'un. We're taking a chance with you not to let us down."

"I'll do my best," said Peter, simply.

"That'll be good enough," said Tim Allen, his grey eyes twinkling. Allen was a stocky man, with jet black hair, a fine, creamy skin, and rugged features—more like a sailor than an airman. But as we know, he had proved his worth time and time again.

"Well," said James Lacre, "now we've reached that momentous decision, we can talk about something else. What happened when you were flying yesterday, Tim?"

Allen's lips tightened, and his eyes narrowed. The grim expression Peter had seen on his uncle's face a short while before was now on Allen's.

"I was going to tell you about that," he said. "I was up five thousand feet, Jimmy, when the stick jammed, and I might tell you I didn't think I'd ever get to land again, excepting in pieces. I didn't get the thing

free until I was almost on the ground. She was stuck tight."

"How'd it happen?" asked Lacre.

Allen shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't *know*. A nut was loose, causing the stick to jam. My mechanic *said* he'd overhauled it, but I have my doubts."

"I thought as much," said James Lacre.

Peter Grey looked from one man to the other, his mind in a whirl. He realised at once the meaning of the words. His uncle and Tim Allen believed there had been an attempt to crash Allen, on the previous day! It didn't seem possible, but these two pilots weren't the men to make mountains out of molehills.

"Who is your mechanic?" Lacre asked.

"A man named Browning," said Tim Allen. "He's comparatively new, but he's a good man. All the same, I think he was bribed to loosen that nut, yesterday."

"Good heavens!" gasped Peter. "Who on earth could have bribed him?"

James Lacre turned soberly to his nephew.

"We don't know," he said, "but at least two of the pilots entering for the race would do anything. Ricardo, as I've told you, is hard-up, and fifty thousand pounds will be a fortune to him—as it will be to any man, of course. Then I'm not happy about the Haufman machine. It's a new type, made in Austria and flown by Austrian pilots. If it's capable of winning the race, it will mean that the Haufman company will make a fortune, for orders for the machine will come in from all

over the world. So you see, young 'un, we're not only in the race for the best machine. We're in a race for fifty thousand pounds, and millions of pounds' worth of orders."

Peter was silent for a moment. This was a thing he had never dreamed of.

"Do you mean either of them might try to prevent you—or any other entrants—from starting?" he demanded.

"Just that," said his uncle. "You see, Peter, the *Pioneer* is one of the favourites for the race. It's been tried before, and it's done good work. Clive's *Angel* and Peterson's *Morning Star* are well-favoured, too." Lacre mentioned two of the most famous contemporary pilots, and their machines. "We can almost say," he went on seriously, "that we three are joint favourites. The Austrian's untried—as are several other entrants. There is a lot of rumour about their abilities, but no one *knows* anything about them. Generally, the experts think the race will resolve into a fight between the *Angel*, the *Morning Star* and the old *Pioneer*. And it stands to reason that if any one of those machines cannot start, either because of engine trouble or because of accidents to the pilots, the other entrants have a bigger chance of winning. That's the position, young 'un."

Peter drew a deep breath.

"It's terrible," he said at last. "But—shouldn't the *Pioneer* be well guarded? Someone might try and damage it."

Lacre laughed, although without much humour.

"It's at Heston, guarded day and night by two well-trusted mechanics—men I've known all my life—and two police-detectives. I'm not taking any chances, Peter. To tell you the truth, I didn't think there would be any danger at all to myself, or Tim. But, unless I'm badly mistaken, the trouble he had yesterday was the result of an attempt to murder him. So —there is someone in this race who will stick at nothing to win it!"

James Lacre spoke in a quiet voice, but there was a wealth of meaning in his tone. Peter realised the dreadful consequences that might have befallen Tim Allen yesterday. It was ghastly!

"Anyhow," James Lacre went on, "I shall arrange with the stewards of the race to keep your name out of the list of pilots until the last minute, Peter. There is no need to take unnecessary risks. All we need do is to be careful. We won't fly again, of course, until we start. We've got rather less than three days, for we're starting at noon on Thursday."

Peter nodded. Tim Allen pushed his hand through his black hair and said with a smile:

"Still keen to come, Peter?"

"Of course," said Peter, his eyes gleaming.

"Well," said Tim with another smile, and looking at James Lacre, "we haven't got anything to fear in our pilots, Jim."

Peter flushed warmly, but before he could speak a waiter came to the table, and asked for "Mr. Lacre."

"Am I wanted?" asked the pilot.

"On the telephone, sir, please. The speaker said it was most urgent."

James Lacre pushed his chair back quickly, and followed the waiter, after telling the others not to wait for him. But neither of them felt like eating.

"Bet we'll feel hungry enough when we're half way across Tibet," said Tim Allen, smiling. "And when we're over the Pacific. You always get hungriest when you're a long way from food, young 'un. By the way—do you know the route we're taking?"

"Yes," said Peter quickly. He had studied every available map, and he knew the points of landing in the conditions of the World race. "Athens first, then Kabul, over China to Shanghai, then a little hop to Yokohama and a big one to Honolulu. After that, San Francisco, New York and—home."

Tim Allen chuckled.

"I believe you had an idea in your head that you'd come," he said. "Anyhow, I'm glad you know the route, young 'un. What's the worst part, do you think?"

Peter forgot his inexperience, and was lost in enthusiasm.

"Well, they're all stiff—excepting the Shanghai-Yokohama hop—but the worst will be the Pacific ocean flight. That's a hop of nearly four thousand miles, sea all the way. And there aren't many shipping roads, either. If we come down there——"

"It's all U P," smiled Tim Allen. "Well, we'll hope for the best. I'm not sure, though,

that I wouldn't rather fly over the Pacific than Afghanistan or Tibet. You *have* got a chance of being picked up at sea, no matter if it's a slim one, but if you come down in some of those jungles in Afghan, or China—well, the less said about it the better. But the longest hop is just on the four thousand. Of course, we can make stops in between, if we want to——"

"Not on the Pacific hop," said Peter quickly. "There's nowhere to land."

Allen nodded. He made no comment, but he was delighted by the intelligent way Peter had already thought out the route. The lad knew just what to expect, and although he had had no previous experience of long-distance flights, Tim Allen believed he would pull his weight.

Before anything else was said, Peter looked up, and saw his uncle approaching.

Peter's heart leapt, suddenly, for James Lacre's face was white and grim. He reached the table in a few long strides, and his voice rang out with such intensity that the other diners there looked up in surprise.

"Come on, you two," he said. "Trouble at Heston. The *Pioneer's* damaged!"

Peter was dimly conscious of the startled comments of the other diners, to whom the name of the famous monoplane was familiar, but the only thing he realised clearly was his uncle's white face, and Tim Allen's startled exclamation. He got up, quickly, completely forgetful of his half-finished dinner. All that mattered was to get to Heston.

The *Pioneer* was damaged!

An hour before, Peter might have been bewildered, and might not have understood what it meant, but now he knew the damage was deliberate. One or more of the entrants for the World Race were going to desperate lengths to put the favourite—or one of them—out of the race. Peter felt a fierce surge of anger, but beneath it there was a dreadful fear lest the *Pioneer* had been damaged beyond repair.

. . . . .

No one could explain how the hangar had been entered, for the four guards swore no one had passed them. But the fact remained that all of the engines—the monoplane was a three-engined machine—had been damaged. One of them, it was obvious at a glance, was beyond repair.

When he saw it, Peter Grey felt sick with disappointment.

"Can't think *how* they got in," muttered one of the detectives who had been on guard at the hangar.

"Probably because you fell asleep," snapped James Lacre. "But it's no use moaning about that, now."

Tim Allen looked anxiously at his friend.

"Pretty well finished us, hasn't it?" he asked.

"It depends on the damage to the other engines," said the older man, thoughtfully. Peter thought he was showing wonderful self-control in the face of this blow. "The middle

engine's smashed, and the left-side's bad enough, but repairable. Let's look at the right-side."

Anxiously, the three of them moved across the nose of the machine, while two mechanics laboured to take the engine down. To Lacre's delight, it was hardly damaged at all—but they found in it a small tin box, about half as big as a match-box.

James Lacre took it out, and handed it to Allen.

"See that?" he said. "Take a look, Peter."

Peter stared at the innocent-looking little thing. He saw the dark grey powder in it, some of which trickled out into Tim's hand. He realised, suddenly, what it was.

"Gunpowder!" he gasped.

"Just that," said his uncle. "Those little explosive canisters were obviously put in two or three nights ago, with a very slow-burning fuse. In other words, no one broke in to-night. It just happened that the thing exploded."

Peter whistled.

"But the powder must have been dud," he said, "or the engines would all have been smashed to pieces."

"That's the only thing that saved us," said James Lacre. "The powder in two of them was wet—or not strong enough. The middle one wasn't, though," he added grimly.

"You're going to run on two engines?" asked Peter.

"I'm not," said his uncle. "But I'd thought of having four engines built on, last time I had the old 'bus tidied up, and I decided

against it because of the weight. There's a spare engine, boys, and by working like niggers we can fit it in, *and* get the others repaired."

"Where's the other engine?" snapped Tim Allen.

"At Napier's, thank heaven," said Lacre. "We can get it over to-night. I think I'd better go and make sure it's got out of store all right. Peter, you'll act under Mr. Allen. *And don't waste a split-second,*" he added grimly.

Peter hardly needed the instructions; nor did any of the others. Half a dozen aerodrome mechanics were detailed to work on the repairs for the *Pioneer*, and for forty-eight hours they swarmed round the great machine, working like furies. Peter had never worked so hard in his life, but he hardly realised his fatigue until he had been hard at it for fourteen hours. Then he stopped for ten minutes—and went to sleep leaning against a bench!

By then the new engine had been fitted. The trouble was entirely with the repairs on the wing-engines.

His uncle woke him up, quickly.

"There's a bunk over in the office, young 'un," he said. "Go over and sleep for a few hours. I'll wake you."

Peter wanted to protest, but he was too tired to think.

He slept a full eight hours, and was then only awakened by the smiling manager, who had a cup of tea in his hands. The man had no objection to his office being turned into

temporary sleeping quarters, and he did everything in his power to help with the repairs.

"How's the work going?" were Peter's first words.

"She'll be ready in time," said the manager. "Drink this, and then have a bath, Mr. Grey. Breakfast will be ready then—in the canteen."

Three quarters of an hour later Peter went back to the hangar. He was amazed at the speed with which the work had been done. In less than six hours the *Pioneer* would be ready for a trial run with its new engine. It would be impossible, of course, to run the engines in as they should have been. They should have had at least seventy-two hours' running to make sure of their reliability. But as much as possible was done.

"The rest," said James Lacre, wearily, "we'll have to chance. Had a good sleep, Peter?"

"Fine," said Peter, looking a little anxiously at the weary air-ace.

"Tim Allen's having a rest now," said his uncle. "Then it's my turn. Meanwhile—get to it, young 'un!"

Peter set to with a will. Now, however, he had more time to think, and he pondered a great deal over the authors of this dastardly trick. Which of the other entrants in the race had committed the crime?

Had it been Ricardo, the Spanish pilot? Or was Haufman, who was piloting the new 'plane built to his own specification in his Austrian sheds, the culprit?

It was impossible to tell. No clue had been

found, and Peter acknowledged that it might have been done by anyone. But in his bones he felt that this flight was not going to be fought by fair means. What would happen when they were started?

And his uncle, although he said nothing of his fears, realised that the normal hazards of the trip, which were bad enough, would be multiplied considerably. There was someone out to win the race at all costs—and who had tried and very nearly succeeded in putting the *Pioneer* out of the fight.

CHAPTER IV

"THEY'RE OFF!"

A GREAT crowd of excited spectators thronged the open fields of Lympne, in Kent, where the take-off for the greatest flight in world history was to start on the fifteenth of February. The start was at noon, instead of the usual early morning take-off, and as a result the crowd numbered several hundreds of thousands. Peter Grey had never seen so many people together in one place before, and his heart was beating with excitement.

It had been a wonderful morning for him.

One of the first things he had seen, after waking up to find his uncle's smiling face above a tray and a cup of steaming tea, had been a newspaper.

It was the *Daily Cry*, a popular paper catering for the sensation-loving population of England, and right across it streamed the words:

"BOY-PILOT IN WORLD RACE."
"NEPHEW OF PIONEER'S OWNER."

Beneath there was a brief description of his life, little of which was true, he thought as he read it, and further descriptions of the other pilots. He read with pride that the *Pioneer*

was first favoured, with Clive's *Angel* and Peterson's *Morning Star* close behind.

The *Pioneer* pilots had stayed over-night at a small hotel at Lympne, and the monoplane had been flown from Heston on the previous night. The engines had ticked over beautifully, and, so far as they could see, the damage three days before had been completely offset by James Lacre's prompt action.

The famous long-distance flier had not allowed the news of the sabotage to get into the press. He did not want the public to realise there was the possibility of foul play in the great race. Like all famous fliers, Lacre was proud of the fine reputation airmen had, and he would do nothing to spoil it. But he did make a full report to the Stewards of the race, and the Royal Aeroplane Club, and he knew the affair would be thoroughly investigated.

"Now," he said to Peter as they stood near the *Pioneer* at half past eleven on that fateful Thursday morning, "we've got to forget about everything except the flight, Peter. Do you feel fit?"

"I'm terribly excited," Peter admitted, and his glowing eyes bespoke the truth of his words. But there was no nervousness in his excitement, Lacre saw with admiration. He had backed a winner in this clean-limbed, clear-eyed young nephew of his.

The next half hour flew by.

Peter had hardly time to worry about the crowd, and the low-voiced roar of conversation that came to his ears. He was busy with the

mechanics and the other two pilots in putting the finishing touches to the machine, and the food supplies.

Actually, the fields presented an astonishing spectacle.

A space of nearly two square miles had been roped off, and was reinforced by strong detachments of police and soldiers. Now and again the eager sightseers pressed forward, trying to break the cordon, but no one succeeded. Inside the magic square only favoured persons were allowed to enter.

There were newspaper men, officials of the big Flying Clubs, the promoters of the race and here and there a few relatives of the competitors. Most of the pilots, however, had no one but men friends with them; the start of a race like this, with the knowledge of its dangers, was no place for women-folk.

Lined up across the fields were the aeroplanes. There were eighteen of them, now, for two entrants had been forced to drop out at the last minute. They ranged from enormous passenger flying-boats, built on similar lines to the great Dutch *Douglas* machine which, a few years before, had put up such a wonderful performance in the England-Australia flight, to single-engined two-seaters of the Comet class. Perhaps the 'plane that attracted more attention than any other was the Austrian *Haufman*, a powerful-looking monoplane with five engines and a passenger capacity of twenty. Only five were travelling in the race, and none of them were actually passengers. The Austrians had

taken every precaution. They were flying with four pilots and a doctor.

The three favourites were all machines of the same class, Napier Monoplanes. The *Angel* was painted white, with black edging, the *Morning Star* was a pale green and the *Pioneer*, as we know, was blue with red edging. They were impressive-looking machines, and they were scheduled to start within two minutes of each other, at twelve eighteen onwards. The *Pioneer* was the middle of the three, and the great moment for Peter Grey would be twenty past twelve.

One or two of the other 'planes had a particular significance for Peter, and he looked for them eagerly. He was not long in seeing the long, rakish lines of the black *Deutschland*, with Graffhein and two other German pilots, which was to be one of the first to start. Near it was Ricardo's *Granada*, a two-engined biplane, painted a bright yellow. Apart from these, the only machine Peter identified was the two-engined Comet, called the *Silver Flier*. It was not painted, and its aluminium sides glistened like sheets of silver.

On this amazing gathering of people, pilots and 'planes the weak February sun shone, gleaming on the wings, reflecting a hundred different colours. The sun added a touch of glory to the spectacle that would otherwise have been missing.

The minutes went by.

At last twelve o'clock came, and with it there was a vast roar from the great crowd.

It filled the air, drowning the hum of the aeroplane that started first. It was the *Silver Flier*, and as it jockeyed for a few seconds and then rose smoothly into the air, the sun glinted on its sides and bathed it with grandeur. It was a perfect take-off. Without a single false movement the little 'plane went up, climbed slowly, and gradually dwindled in the distance. The two minutes that passed before the next 'plane, a Comet, seemed an eternity, but it started at last, and the roar of the crowd went with it. Then Peter Grey began to feel the real excitement of that marvellous morning.

He had not thought of the possibility that he would never get back to England again. The dangers of the race were forgotten. He longed to feel the 'plane leave the ground, he longed to look back and take a last glance at the crowd, at the other machines, at the green fields of England.

He didn't know, of course. But amongst those eighteen 'planes, carrying in all sixty people, four were doomed never to return, and only forty-eight of that brave band of pilots were to live to take off again.

. . . . .

"Ready, Peter?"

"Aye aye, sir!"

"No cheek, you young scamp," smiled Tim Allen. "Get in, and don't sit on the chickens."

Peter laughed, as Tim intended he should do, and climbed into the cabin. Tim Allen followed him; a few seconds later James Lacre

entered. A mechanic closed the door, and the two men sat in their places, at the controls. A mechanic was at the propellers. Peter heard the now familiar cry of "contact!" there was a whirr of engines——

They were off!

Like a great bird, the *Pioneer* lifted into the air, smooth and steady. Through the windows Peter could see the little bunch of officials and newsmen waving Godspeed. Here and there he saw a camera, sometimes a cinematograph, but it all seemed vague to him. In the background there was that vast, grey mass of people, and even now the thunderous roaring of their voices could be heard, like the smashing of waves against the rocky shore.

They were climbing.

Up, up, up they went, into the heavens. Ahead of them stretched a wide expanse of light blue sky. It was a perfect morning for the start of that greatest of all races, and Peter knew the *Pioneer* had made a perfect start.

He recaptured the thrill of his first ascent as he looked down at England, and then looked ahead.

The silvery stretch of the channel was beneath him. Then the dark mass of the continent, France first, with the sun shining on the white cliffs of the French coast.

The minutes flew by.

The channel was behind them before any of the three pilots spoke. Then it was James Lacre, who left the controls in Tim's charge for a few minutes, and moved to Peter's side.

"All right, young 'un?"

"Never been better," said Peter, smiling.

"That's the stuff," said his uncle. "Well, we're off. In ten days' time—or less, with a bit of luck, my lad—we'll be back again. But a lot of things might happen in that ten days," he added with a laugh. "Hop into my place, Peter, and try the controls. We can't have any slackers this trip!"

Peter laughed, and obeyed with alacrity.

Ahead of him he could see the *Angel*, and he realised that most of the other pilots were feeling very much like he was, now. They were all of them on the threshold of the greatest adventure they had ever had in their lives.

But he was the only one of them all who was making his first long-distance flight. *His first!*

Yet he had no difficulty in controlling the monoplane. At the controls he felt as cool as he had ever done, on trial flights. He didn't even realise that the older pilots were watching him, to see how he came out of the trial, and he didn't see his uncle wink at Tim Allen, as much as to say: "he's all right." But he did know they trusted him. They had given him his part to play as if he was their equal, and he thrilled to the thought of it.

He had no idea of the ordeals to come, but if he had he would not have backed out. Flying was in his blood. The love of speed, of pioneering, was part of him, and he would never turn his back on that great calling.

CHAPTER V

STORM AND DISASTER

"THAT'S Paris," said James Lacre, suddenly.

Peter looked out, and saw the grey mass of the capital of France stretched out in front of him. He nodded and smiled. It seemed amazing that the machine had travelled over a hundred miles, for they had only been up three-quarters of an hour. But he realised the *Pioneer* ate up space. Its fastest speed was over two hundred miles an hour, while it cruised at a hundred and fifty, with all three engines running.

Peter kept the controls for two hours. Then, with Paris a long way behind, he went back to the rear seat of the little cabin, and began to sort out small parcels of food.

The provisions for the trip would last them a fortnight or more, if they rationed it carefully, although there was little doubt they would be able to take in fresh supplies at Athens, and the other forced stopping places. In none of their minds did the possibility of trouble loom largely. All of them were on the crest of a wave of optimism. For over two hours they had been flying, and there had been nothing to prevent them from enjoying the smooth, easy travelling of the great machine. The sun was still smiling, and there was little or no

wind, although now and again the *Pioneer* dipped as, climbing, it passed from one air current to another.

Then, before they had realised it, the heavens clouded over. In the space of a few minutes they were flying through heavy clouds, and rain was thrashing on to the 'plane. In the distance they could see the heavens streaked with the vivid yellow forks of lightning, and now and again thunder rumbled ominously.

"Better send a message," James Lacre said quietly. "Warn the others behind we're riding into trouble."

Peter nodded, and leaned over to the wireless transmitter. The *Pioneer* was fitted, like all the other machines in the race, with powerful sets for both receiving and sending out messages. Peter had been trained into the use of them, and he took only a few seconds to get the set ready.

"Storm south-east of France," said Lacre. "Clouds at three thousand feet."

Peter repeated the message three times. Then, with the ear-phones on his head, he listened for a response. One came, suddenly, and Peter was almost startled by the seeming nearness of it.

"*Morning Star*," came the voice. "Thank you, *Pioneer*. How's it going?"

"*Pioneer* going well, *Morning Star*," said Peter, smiling. "All right with you?"

"No complaints," said the other voice. "Good-bye."

A few minutes later another voice came to Peter's ears, a different one this time, but English again.

"*Angel* calling," came the voice of Clive. "Storm area ended after covering forty miles."

Peter answered, and then passed the information on to the others. It meant they were nearly out of the storm belt, and they had suffered very little. The machine swayed, with the force of the wind, but never faltered. Soon the rain stopped, and ahead of them streaks of grey light shone through the clouds.

"It's getting towards night," said Lacre. "Keep those ear-phones on, Peter, and come and take over. I'll sleep for four hours. You'll call me, Tim, and Peter can take the night sleep."

They changed places, but Peter still kept the ear-phones on. After a while he hardly realised he was wearing them, and now, with darkness enveloping them, the flight was almost monotonous. They had been up five hours, and still there was not the slightest trouble, nor suggestion of trouble.

It was just after six o'clock that Peter Grey had the first shock that came on the grim journey they had started.

It was a cry through the ether, a terrible cry for help! For a moment the lad's body tensed. Then he strained his ears to catch the words. They came, with dreadful meaning.

"S O S. *Greyhound* falling—engine trouble. S O S. Position Long. 18 Lat. 51. Landing stations please watch——"

Tim saw the youngster's tensed body and snapped:

"What is it, Peter?"

"The *Greyhound*"—Peter knew the 'plane, which was of the two-engined Mammoth type —"falling. Good Lord!"

"Relay the message," snapped Tim. "And hurry!"

Peter spoke into the transmitter, his voice hard and metallic, very much unlike his usual tones. He stopped at last, and went back to the controls, which Allen had been handling behind him. For a few minutes there was silence. Allen was letting the lad go through this first ordeal on his own.

Peter was white-faced. Two spots of red glowed on his cheeks, but otherwise there was no spark of colour. His lips were compressed, and he felt sick.

At last he said:

"Is there any chance for them, Tim?"

"There's always a chance," said Tim Allen, with forced lightness. "Don't let it get you, lad."

"Are we anywhere near it?" asked Peter.

"What? The *Greyhound?* Very near, from that position."

Peter relapsed into silence.

Around him was darkness. Only the little cabin was illuminated, and the dark, silent void outside seemed like eternity to the lad. He had done hours of night flying, and he had taken machines through severe storms. But never before had he heard that terrible S O S for help.

He could not get it out of his mind. The minutes went by, quickly, and every second

he expected the cry for help to come again. But it did not. There was only silence.

And then, suddenly, he saw something ahead of him.

At first it was a mere prick of light, no larger than the glowing end of a cigarette. But it grew larger. Soon he could see the flames leaping up.

His exclamation burst out. At it, Tim Allen leaned forward, and James Lacre awakened, with a start. All three men stared at that mass of flames below.

Tim spoke at last.

"Poor old *Greyhound*," he said.

There was a silence in the cabin that could almost be felt. Peter could not speak. There was a lump in his throat he could not force down. If the danger had been personal, if he had been in the doomed 'plane, he believed he could have faced it more easily. But to be up here, safe, while the men in the *Greyhound* were perishing in that holocaust of flame and fire below, was terrible.

They passed almost directly over the burning 'plane—for none of them doubted what the fire was—and soon there was only blackness ahead. They were flying over the southernmost end of Germany, Peter knew. He tried to think about their route, in order to forget what he had seen.

Athens was their first stop—if they reached it. They could come down before, of course, but the *Pioneer* was easily capable of doing the hop, which was something over three

thousand four hundred miles, by the route they were taking. They had tried to avoid the Italian Alps, which were dangerous in night-flying, but they would not be able to tell for sure whether they had succeeded for an hour at least.

At ten o'clock Peter was relieved. He went to his seat, not expecting to sleep, fearing that he would be haunted by the vision of the flames. But he dropped off quickly. The droning of the engines seemed to lull him to sleep.

To his surprise, it was broad daylight when he woke up.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, as he looked at his watch. "It's past six!"

"And time for breakfast," laughed his uncle. "We've had ours, lazybones. Tea's in the thermos."

Peter breakfasted off chicken sandwiches and hot tea. He felt fit, now. The thing of the previous night seemed like something that had happened in a dream.

Below he could see great stretches of mountainous country and, towards his right, he could see the blue face of the sea. In fact, water seemed all about him.

"The big lump's the Mediterranean," said his uncle, "and the smaller patch on the left is the Black Sea. Well, young 'un. How d'you feel now you've been flying for eighteen hours?"

"I've never felt better," said Peter. "But how near Athens are we?"

"Less than five hundred miles," said James Lacre. "We've had a wonderful journey, so far. With any luck we'll make the town in three hours, and we needn't stop any longer than it'll take us to refuel."

Peter nodded, and then said suddenly:

"Any more messages?"

"No more trouble," said James Lacre, thankfully. "Clive's *Angel's* still pottering about in front of us, and the *Morning Star* must be a couple of hundred miles behind."

"So we've got ahead of Peterson?"

"A bit, yes. But the class is going well, and that's a big thing. We had a call from the German, who's catching up on the *Star*, but we haven't caught anything else we could identify."

Peter took a spell at the controls. The great machine was still eating space. It seemed that it could never go wrong. The very fact they were within a few hundred miles of Athens, already, almost startled Peter. He had never before realised how long a full twenty-four hours' flying, without a stop, really was.

Peter wondered where Ricardo and Haufman were.

They were the two suspects, and he knew there was a possibility of trouble coming from them. But as he thought about it he realised that if any attempts were made to hamper the *Pioneer* they would not come in the first stage. Later, when they were flying over the sea and the wastes of Tibet, the danger would come.

Peter found himself thinking more, now, of the possibility of attack. It *was* possible. Anyone who would make an attempt to bring a single pilot down—like they had tried on Allen—would not stop at bringing three men crashing to their death.

The period of suspense was working on Peter's nerves, and the two men realised it. They talked and joked, about small things that, normally, would not have made Peter laugh. But gradually he forgot the dangers surrounding him. He seemed to sink back into normal life.

They were within a hundred miles of Athens, travelling over Greece and seeing the strange passages the sea cut through that country, when Peter saw something behind them.

"Look!" he shouted, unable to control himself.

The others looked round, quickly, and then Lacre broke into a broad smile.

"Well done, Graffhein," he said. "He's past the *Star*, and he'll be past us in a brace of shakes."

He was right.

Less than two minutes after Peter had sighted the great black German 'plane, it went past them. It was a hundred yards or more to the right of them. Peter pressed against the window and grinned and waved. The others—in the German 'plane—waved back.

It was a wonderful spectacle, to see the great machine flying past them, and none of them felt in any way jealous of the superior speed

of the German 'plane. Lacre, as Peter knew, liked Graffhein.

"One thing," he said as the German got in front, "we've both kept to the route pretty well. Ah-ha! See that mass of houses, young 'un?"

Peter looked downwards. Perhaps twenty miles away he saw the town, and he grinned as he realised what it was.

"*Athens!*"

"Right first time," said his uncle. "We'll be there in ten minutes. Like to take her down, Peter?"

Peter grinned his reply.

He felt a wonderful exhilaration as, with the landing field plainly visible, and the crowds of spectators already gathered to greet the first 'planes in, he went downwards. He glided down, and there was hardly a bump as the wheels touched the ground.

Then the 'plane was rushed by a couple of dozen men who were shouting, camera-men who were busy with their machines, officials with a glad welcome.

James Lacre opened the cabin door. Smiling, and almost as fresh as when he had stepped into the 'plane at Lympne, he climbed out. The others followed him, and the cheers of the crowd was like music in his ears.

There were only two other 'planes at Athens. The German had arrived within two minutes of the *Angel*. Graffhein and Clive came towards the newcomers, smiling. They shook hands all round.

Graffhein was a slimly-built man, who looked

little more than a boy. He spoke excellent, although rather harsh English, and he was obviously delighted at having passed them. Clive, an Englishman who was over six-feet-three in height, was normally a very reserved man, but now he was chatting eagerly. The strain of that great hop from London had told on them all, although it had no bad results.

Half an hour later, the *Morning Star* arrived, and it was followed quickly by the *Haufman*, the yellow *Granada* with Ricardo at the controls, and two American machines.

There was news at Athens.

They learned for certain that the *Greyhound* had crashed, twenty miles from the nearest landing field, and the three fliers in it had perished. Two of the big passenger boats had landed at Marseilles, and were held up with engine trouble. Three of the starters had developed such serious faults within the first hour's flying that they had turned back to England, and were out of the race. All the rest had made their first stop before Athens. So far, only the *Greyhound* had been a casualty.

They had a bath while the tanks were re-filled, and ate a light lunch which had been prepared by the Greek Flying Club in their honour. Less than two hours elapsed before they were up again. Before them, Graffhein, Ricardo, Haufman and Clive had gone. None of them had stopped a minute longer than was necessary.

"But a couple of hours on the ground means a lot," said James Lacre, smiling a little. "We'll be glad of it before we've reached Kabul."

"Think we'll manage it?" asked Tim Allen.

"We'll see," said the other. "It's a long hop, and it's over nasty country. But if we don't have any trouble for the first twelve hours, we'll carry on. Ready, young 'un?"

Peter jumped to his feet. Five minutes later the 'plane swooped upwards to the sky, with the crowds waving behind them.

None of them spoke of it, but they all realised that of the four 'planes ahead of them, two were "suspect." If Haufman or Ricardo *had* been instrumental in making that attempt to put the *Pioneer* out of action, they could be ready for trouble.

Peter sensed what the others felt. All of them would have been a lot happier if the two 'planes they were thinking of in particular were behind, instead of in front of them. But they would have to face the situation.

On the surface of it, it seemed impossible there could be any deliberate attempt to bring them down. But fifty thousand pounds was more than enough to make certain men commit murder.

And the next stage of the flight, the stage on which they had already embarked, was over some of the worst country in the world. Before they reached Kabul they would have to fly across Turkey, the Caspian Sea, and Afghanistan. It was the latter country that worried James Lacre more than anything else. It was mountainous, and he knew that at all times of the year there were heavy clouds at the mountain tops. They would have to keep very

high, or they might strike the side of a mountain; if that happened they were finished.

Before, they had always been within reach of civilization. Now, the only landing fields they would pass, were those of the Air Force outposts of England and the other countries, small places which, although the attendants would be on the look-out for them, would be difficult to locate.

But the race was on!

CHAPTER VI

ENGINE TROUBLE

It was not long before Peter Grey began to forget everything else in the marvel of the country that was opened out in front of him like a great relief map. Never in his life had he dreamed of such grandeur. He could see rocky mountains, with their peaks thousands of feet up, so far below him that they looked little more than gigantic haystacks. At that time the *Pioneer* was flying high, and it rarely descended lower than 10,000 feet during the second flight.

Valleys wound in and out of the mountains, sometimes with little streams that shone silver and gold in the light of the sun. Occasionally they would fly over a wider river, and then, after about six hours' flying, and when darkness was beginning to fall over the country, leaving a thousand changing colours, Peter saw the vast, silver stretch of the Tigris, winding its way through Turkey. Earlier in the trip the famous straits of the Dardanelles had been passed, and huddled cities with white, domed buildings rearing up against the dark background, had gone beneath them. They were well past Kurdistan, now. The next big city would be Bagdad, where they might land.

James Lacre knew that in this part of the world there was always the possibility of sudden storms of terrible violence, in which it was almost impossible for aeroplanes, no matter how large, to survive without flying very low. And if they flew low there was always the danger of crashing into the side of a mountain, for, during the storms, and frequently in calm weather, the summits were covered with swirling white clouds.

The full hop was just over three thousand miles, for although, as the crow flies, Athens and Kabul are little more than two thousand five hundred miles apart, it was necessary to detour in order to avoid some of the higher ranges of mountains and, even more important, to escape from certain air-currents which were particularly dangerous.

These currents met together at certain times, usually governed by the temperature of the different stratas or layers of air, and created a miniature whirlwind. Frequently they did not stretch more than a few hundred feet. Although they consisted only of air, and small particles of dust collected by the wind from almost all the countries of the world, they were very much like gigantic tops, spinning through space.

By day, it was usually possible to see them, and avoid them. As with most of the dangers of pure flying, the greatest danger was at night.

Peter Grey had never struck one of these whirlwinds of the air, although he had, of course, frequently read of great whirlwinds or

tornadoes which swept across the countries nearer the Equator than England, causing colossal havoc. He had read in the papers of the dreadful calamities that had followed, and now Tim Allen told him they were actually the gigantic winds that gradually grew out of the small ones they were likely to meet in the course of their flight.

Tim Allen and Peter were at the controls as they talked, and the darkness was over the world, like a pall of impenetrable smoke. There were no stars; clouds had gathered since day had departed, and the *Pioneer* was flying by its instruments, and keeping well over the ten thousand feet altitude.

"You see that fellow there," Tim said, touching a small, clock-like instrument which had been specially fitted to the monoplane for the trip. "If that needle starts shivering, you know there's a big storm or a wind ahead. Then we've got to look out for trouble, young 'un."

Peter looked with keen interest at the dial.

"How does it tell you?" he asked.

"It's extremely sensitive to sound," said Tim Allen, "and wind—these whirlwinds in particular—have a certain tone of their own. This little gadget has been tuned in so that it can pick out wind sounds from anything else, and then it begins to shiver. You'll have to watch it, Peter."

Peter found the dial fascinating. He felt excited rather than nervous at the thought that the needle might start to move at any moment.

Now they were flying, as far as they knew, alone. There had been no wireless messages, and it was possible all the other 'planes were a long way away. They knew the other British monoplanes were trying the long hop to Kabul, and they believed Graffhein, Ricardo and Haufman were making the same flight. Most of the other machines had decided to stop at Bagdad, and commence the dangerous Afghanistan flight in daylight.

These 'planes worked on the assumption that by making the world flight in easy stages they would be freer from trouble than those machines that tried to do it in six long hops, although, of course, if any of the more ambitious fliers succeeded in getting through without trouble, they would land in London well ahead of their rivals.

But as the *Pioneer* flew through that awful blackness, all thought of the competition was forced from Peter's mind.

At this stage in the race he was occupied with the actual flying, and the hazards of the trip, rather than the ultimate object. Everything was forgotten in the fascination of wondering whether they would run into trouble, or whether the second stage would go off as smoothly as the first.

Peter was to be relieved at twelve o'clock, and by half past eleven he was looking forward to sleep. He was surprised how tired he got, although he understood that being in that cramped cabin, without being able to move unless he bent almost double, fatigue was inevitable.

Something crackled through the ether, and he heard the sound in his ear-phones. He tensed, wondering whether a message was coming through, or whether it was an atmospheric false alarm. Then, as he listened with his eyes fixed unconsciously on the needle of the wind-gauge, he saw it move!

Just for a moment it shivered to and fro. Then it stopped. But by the time Peter had snapped out:

"The needle's moved!" it was off again.

Peter saw the man's face tighten, and he saw that grim, tense expression that seemed characteristic of airmen.

"Right, young 'un," he said. "Get into your belt."

Peter's safety belt was fastened to the seat, and he buckled it round his waist quickly. Meanwhile Allen shouted:

"Jimmy—wake up!"

James Lacre, who had been asleep in the spare seat, opened his eyes immediately. He was wide awake in a few seconds.

"Hallo—what's the trouble?"

"Wind," said Tim Allen, briefly.

Lacre's eyes widened, and he immediately searched for the end of his safety belt. Peter didn't realise at first why these were necessary, for in the closed cabin it was impossible for anyone to fall out.

"Is it still moving?" Lacre asked.

"Faster than ever," said Peter, his eyes glued to the needle.

"Then we're in for a packet," said his uncle.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the thing happened. It came with such devastating suddenness that Peter didn't realise what it was.

One moment the monoplane was flying smoothly, and without a bump. The next it seemed to crash against an immovable brick wall. There was a tremendous noise, worse than any explosion Peter had ever heard.

And at the same time the great machine lurched like a drunken thing, and seemed to drop down like a stone!

The blood rushed to Peter's head. Only the safety strap round his waist had saved him from being hurled from his seat and smashed against the sides of the cabin. His head went round and round, filled with a tremendous roaring. The instruments in front of him seemed to be moving round and round, hopelessly mixed up with each other. And all the time there was a wailing din outside, a noise worse than anything Peter had ever experienced before.

And the *Pioneer* was falling!

It was actually flying on its wings, one of which was straight above Peter's head, the other immediately beneath him. But its nose and its tail were still level with each other, which meant it was under control.

Before he lost complete hold on himself, Peter made an attempt to lock the controls —the usual safety measure. But Tim Allen, behind him, bellowed:

"Leave it to me, Peter!"

Peter gritted his teeth, and watched the controls as they moved at Allen's touch. The monoplane was shivering, now, like a rat shaken in a terrier's jaw. He could hardly see, but somehow he kept his eyes open. All the time there was that terrible sensation of falling—falling.

For a dreadful minute Peter thought it was the end. He didn't see how it would be possible to recover from this awful shock.

But the end, when it came, was altogether different from what he had expected.

There was a sudden cessation of movement, as abrupt as the moment when the *Pioneer* had flown into the wind. Then it shivered once or twice, like a dog shaking itself free of water. Then, wonder of wonders, it glided forward, smoothly—and ahead of him Peter could see a pale white light—the light of the moon!

He felt stiff and sore as he turned to Tim Allen.

"Gee! That was tough!"

Tim laughed a little, with relief.

"The toughest I've struck," he admitted. "What do you think, Jim?"

James Lacre was smiling, but his face was white and strained. The ordeal of that terrible buffeting could not be easily forgotten, although it was over.

"Pretty grim, boys," he said. "I didn't think we'd get through it. Luck's with us, this trip."

The others nodded.

The immediate reaction, now, was for them

to laugh and joke together, in an excited, rather hysterical way. Perhaps it was because the youngster was with them that the more experienced men allowed themselves to relax from their normal calm self-control, but Peter didn't realise it.

A few minutes after his uncle relieved him, and he squeezed back to the spare seat. He saw that all the things they had brought with them—food, tobacco, first-aid oddments—were all secure. They had been fastened to brackets in the walls of the cabin, ready for just such an emergency as this.

Peter yawned, and settled his stiff body as best he could. As always, he dropped asleep quickly.

He woke up again with the sun streaming through the windows of the cabin. This morning, however, he did not immediately hear the chaffing voices of his uncle and Tim Allen. A low rumble of talk reached his ears, but in his half-bemused state of mind he didn't realise what they were saying.

It was another sound that pierced his consciousness.

At first it was a vague thing. He recognised there was something different, but he didn't immediately know what it was. Then, with a shoot of alarm that cleared all the sleepiness out of his mind, he *knew*.

One of the engines was knocking badly!

"Are we all right?" he called out.

The others looked round quickly, with smiles that Peter knew were put on to reassure him.

"A spot of engine trouble," said his uncle lightly. "The middle engine's kicking, Peter. But we can't be more than three hours away from Kabul. We'll make it. And as for you, my lad, you'd better get your brekker."

Peter obeyed, for he was hungry and thirsty. The fresh tea, taken on at Athens, was hot and encouraging, although the cabin was quite warm—they had not yet experienced the worst trial of the air—extreme cold.

As he ate and drank, Peter listened keenly. And as he finished the meal, he said quietly:

"What's the matter with the left engine?"

Again the other laughed a little.

"You're quick," said his uncle. "It stopped, three or four hours ago, Peter. We're running on one engine and a crock, at the moment."

He had hardly finished speaking when, with a final spluttering, the middle engine gave out altogether. Now only the drone from the one on the right could be heard. The monoplane was flying under a grave handicap—and if the third engine faltered they would be helpless.

Peter knew, of course, that a machine in the three-engine class could keep in the air with one engine working, but that it needed all three to maintain its highest average cruising speed. They were travelling now, at little more than a hundred miles an hour, on one engine only.

Other things had to be taken into account, too. They would have to stop at Kabul now, long enough to have the engines repaired, which meant a serious delay. Troubles were falling thick and fast.

But all the time Peter was conscious of one great anxiety.

What would happen if the third engine failed?

He knew they would have to try to land, but as he looked below, at the rocky, forest-clad Afghan mountains, he realised the chances of a safe landing were practically *nil!*

There were no flat pieces, visible from their height, and although they kept a sharp look-out, they failed to sight any of the Air Force outposts which, they knew, were ready to render all aid possible.

While their one engine was running without trouble, they were safe enough to reach Kabul. But supposing it failed?

All three were keyed up to a pitch of anxiety that Peter, for one, had never experienced before. Several times he fancied he heard a suspicious break in the smooth drone of the engine, and he held his breath for seconds at a stretch. Each time he was mistaken.

But suddenly a break did come. For a fraction of a second that seemed like minutes the engine knocked. Then it went on smoothly again. But this time James Lacre and Tim Allen had noticed it, too.

James Lacre spoke with forced cheerfulness.

"Another hour and a half and we'll be there," he said. "We'll last out——"

Knock-knock-knock-knock.

The engine kicked again, as though to throw his words back in his teeth. This time Peter's uncle frowned, and said nothing. Again the

engine picked up, but there was trouble there, and the trouble might break out badly enough to force them down.

The altitude of the 'plane dropped. The men at the controls flew as low as possible, and Peter swept the countryside with his glasses, hoping against hope to sight some stretch which might give them space in which to land.

But there was none.

If they went down here, they could only smash. True, they might be able to save the machine from complete destruction, but the chances against them were very big. Even if they got down, there was no room for a take-off, should they be able to patch the engines up enough.

They were flying over Afghanistan, relying on one crocked engine to carry them over two hundred miles or more of wild, mountainous country.

And then the engine spluttered again.

This time the break lasted for a full minute. By superb control, the pilots kept the machine at a good altitude, planing down with the wind and banking whenever they got a chance. At last the engine picked up—but all of them knew it would not last out until they reached Kabul.

They would have to land!

Or smash.

CHAPTER VII

PETER'S DESPERATE GAMBLE

"WELL, young 'un," said James Lacre, with a grim smile. "We told you to expect trouble, and now you're going to get it. But I've been in worse spots than this, so keep your pecker up!"

Peter smiled back.

For some reason he could not understand he did not feel terribly afraid. He saw the possibility of a crash as something in a dream. Queerly enough, he was more concerned now with getting to Kabul, and thus making sure that a disastrous stop here did not put them out of the World Race. It was on that he concentrated, and consequently there was no expression of fear in his eyes.

"You really think we'll go down?" he asked.

"Have to make a landing soon," said his uncle. "First half a chance we get, we'll make it."

"I see," said Peter, in a quiet voice. He eyed his uncle frankly. "What do you think is wrong with the engines?" he asked.

James Lacre shrugged his shoulders.

"This fellow and the middle one have choked leads, I fancy. Can't tell with the other. But we can't do anything up here, Peter, so it doesn't help us much."

"I don't see why we can't do something," said Peter steadily.

His uncle frowned uncertainly.

"Now then, scamp!" he exclaimed. "What idea have you got in your noddle? Trot it out!"

Peter gave a short laugh.

"I was thinking this way," he said. "We're flying very steadily, and there isn't much wind. If we could get at the engines, maybe we could put 'em right without much trouble."

"But we can't get at them!"

"We can," said Peter, quietly. "I'm not boasting, Uncle, but I think I could get along the wings, and have a look at them, anyhow. It might only need a minute or two's work."

James Lacre said nothing for a moment. Then he shook his head, slowly.

"Risk's too great, young 'un," he said. "But thanks for suggesting it."

Peter stuck to his guns, doggedly.

"But the risk isn't any greater than the one we stand at now," he said. "Supposing we crash? None of us have a chance. It won't make any difference——"

"If anyone goes," said James Lacre, firmly, "it won't be you, Peter. I won't let you."

"That means," said Peter, grimly, "almost certain failure. Both you and Mr. Allen are too heavy. You'd take the machine down. Uncle, *please!* I'm not a greenhorn, and I can handle the repair, if it's a simple one, as well as you. I'm a trained mechanic. And as for the danger, I could strap the parachute to my back, and if I fell off, I'd get down safely."

"You'd drop into a jungle you couldn't

penetrate, or among savage tribesmen who'd probably murder you," said James Lacre, choosing his words with deliberation.

"On the other hand," said Peter, "they might be friendly. And I could take enough food to last me several days. Uncle Jim—you must let me try! I'm a full member of the expedition—I knew all the dangers before I started, and so did you. If you won't let me go out now, you ought not to have let me come at all."

Peter was white as he spoke, and he meant every word he said. He did not expect the immediate reaction from his uncle, however.

For James Lacre's handsome face broke into a smile. He extended his hand, and gripped Peter's firmly.

"Young 'un," he said, "you're a hundred per cent."

"And he's talking sense." Tim Allen spoke for the first time. "I'd rather go out myself—but I'm too heavy."

Peter's eyes gleamed. He felt a strange, burning sensation in his chest.

"You mean I can try it?"

"Peter," said James Lacre, moving to the spare seat and leaving Tim Allen in complete control, "you've decided for yourself—and it wouldn't be fair not to let you go. But hurry!"

Peter Grey knew exactly what he was risking, but he was too excited to think much of the dangers he would run.

One thing he did know.

Unless one of those engines was put right, it meant a smash! Nothing in the world could

save them. He held the safety of himself and the others in his hands.

It was a tremendous responsibility for a lad; but he did not flinch from it. His very youth made him the only one of the trio who stood a reasonable chance of success. He *had* to go!

He worked quickly, with his uncle.

Little packets of sandwiches and a thermos flask were tied in a bundle to his back. The parachute was fitted. In his pocket he stuffed half a dozen small tools, that would have to be enough for him to work with. Less than five minutes after he had talked so grimly with his uncle, he opened the cabin door.

There was a tense air of expectancy about them all.

The *Pioneer* was flying low, so as to get as far from the rarefied air of the upper stratas as possible, but as Peter Grey commenced that perilous, desperate attempt, he felt the cold wind sting his face and his hands. He gasped!

But he went on.

The monoplane rocked a little as he climbed out of the cabin, and sought a foothold on the fuselage. Slowly, inch by inch, he moved along the wing.

The wind created by the speed of the 'plane —which had been dropped to eighty, the absolute lowest speed for safety—whipped at his face and hands, sent his leather coat flapping about him. For a few seconds he stood absolutely still, getting accustomed to the wind and the cold, keen air. Then he started to move again, with agonising slowness.

Now he was out there, away from the security of the cabin, he realised the fearful dangers that surrounded him. One slip, and he was gone! It was possible, even probable, that he would strike his head against the 'plane, and thus stun himself so that he could not open the parachute. He knew, now, that the slightest false step meant *death!*

Inch by inch, he crept along the wing.

He was on all fours now, and the wind worried him less. But he was forced to look down, and he could see the great expanse of hilly country stretched out beneath him. His breath came quickly, in short, sharp jerks.

But every second took him closer to the engine.

Once he could reach it he would be able to stand up, and lean against it for support. The actual work there was of little importance, compared with getting to and from the cabin.

Minutes flew.

In the cabin, the two men were watching him tensely. Both were filled with an intense admiration for his courage. They knew that not one lad in a thousand would have volunteered for that perilous task—not one in a thousand would have realised the work was possible. James Lacre stared with brilliant eyes at the crouching figure of his nephew, and all the time there was a terrible anxiety lest Peter should slip.

Peter went on. Less than two yards separated him from the left-side engine. Four feet, now —two.

He was there!

A tremendous surge of relief went through him as his outstretched hand touched the engine itself. Then, slowly, perilously, he dragged himself up, so that he was standing on the wing, and resting against the engine supports.

Five hundred feet above the ground, a lone, slim figure, he stood there, balancing, accustoming himself to the swaying of the machine. His face was set in grim lines that might have suited a man ten years older. In that moment, in fact, Peter Grey was a man in the truest sense of the word. He was risking his life for the others, making the greatest gamble possible.

At last he was steady.

Then he took a wrench from his pocket, and began to work at the nuts that fastened the engine-casing down. He loosened them, slowly, for his fingers were stiff and cold. At last he had six of them free, and he was able to twist the casing round so that he could get at the engine.

How long he stood there he hardly knew.

The leads seemed clear, the petrol-pipe wasn't clogged, the carburettors seemed in order. But one by one he took them out of their seating and cleaned them. It seemed that he was standing, on the edge of eternity, for ever. At last, however, he had finished. No part of the engine he could get at without dismantling was left untouched.

He could do no more.

His fingers were warmer, now, for he had

used them a great deal. He replaced the top of the casing, and screwed it down. Then he turned back, slowly, to the cabin.

He reached it at last.

Inside he could see the two men, both looking at him tensely. James Lacre pushed open the cabin door, and shouted:

"Find anything?"

"Try the engine!" Peter bellowed back. "I'll wait here!"

He knew that if the engine did not work now, there was a fault that could only be seen to on the ground. If it failed, he would have to try again, with the middle engine.

For what seemed an interminable time he stood crouched against the cabin. Through the glass he could see his uncle working at the controls for the left-side engine. Would he never press the starting switch?

At last his finger touched it.

With a sudden roar that made the monoplane shiver and almost sent Peter from his precarious perch, the engine started!

It seemed incredible, but it had happened.

One of the leads or carburettors must have been choked. Now it was clear, and the engine was working smoothly. There was no stuttering in its deep-toned roar.

Peter had succeeded!

His uncle, smiling broadly, opened the cabin door again. Peter climbed in, stiffly. The heat of the cabin seemed to meet him as he left the rarefied air outside, and he coughed, but after a few minutes he felt better. He sat

back in the spare seat, smiling weakly, breathing hard.

His uncle rubbed his hands, briskly. The blood flowed back, painfully at first, then with a warm, welcome rush. All the time the monoplane went on, like a great bird, with the repaired engine working perfectly.

But in less than five minutes, the right-side engine stopped. It had been touch and go.

"Peter," said James Lacre, "we'll never be able to say how much we admire you, for that."

"And that goes for me," said Tim Allen, twisting round in his seat and smiling. "Hot stuff, young 'un!"

Peter smiled back. He felt proud, but more than that he felt a deep satisfaction. He had won his spurs, and had taken his place among real men. And the *Pioneer* was still in the race!

An hour and a half later, James Lacre called out to the lad, cheerfully.

"Kabul ahead, son!"

Kabul! The second resting place in the great race. And what was more, they had travelled over seven thousand miles in forty-eight hours —less than forty-five flying hours!

With glistening eyes Peter Grey watched the town spread out beneath him, and saw again the great crowds gathered, the fields waiting for the 'plane to land. He felt a tremendous surge of triumph as his uncle planed downwards, and dimly he heard the roar of the Afghan crowd.

CHAPTER VIII

FOUL PLAY

THERE were two other machines in the race at Kabul. Graffhein was there, with his *Deutchsland,* and Clive was with his *Angel*—apparently an aptly named machine. The three pilots of the *Pioneer* learned that the *Morning Star* had been forced down at Bagdad, and three other entrants had reached the Turkish city.

"What about Ricardo and Haufman?" James Lacre asked Clive, after the rush of their greeting was over, and mechanics were swarming over the engines of the *Pioneer.*

"Both in front," said Clive. "Neither of them have had any trouble yet—and I'm clear. So is Graffhein. Did you strike anything?"

"We nearly struck a lump of Afghanistan," said Lacre, with a smile. "Two engines dead, and one kicking."

"I saw you came down with one," said Clive. "But it wasn't kicking."

James Lacre laughed, and put his hand on Peter's arm.

"It was, once," he said. "This young scamp took a walk along the wing, and put it right."

There was a moment's silence.

Clive looked into Peter's eyes, and Graffhein,

who was nearby, stared too. Then both of them exclaimed:

"Great Scott! It's a miracle."

Peter coloured a little, but before he knew where he was, Clive, that tall, shy man, was shaking his hand, and the German was thumping him on the back. The two great international pilots paid him a tremendous compliment, and the warmth of it he would never forget.

It was not long before the news got round the aerodrome, which was full of all the Europeans of any important social position in Kabul, and many Afghans of high caste. People Peter had never heard of came up to him, and almost snowed him under with their praise. But through it all Peter kept a level head. As he saw it, he had just done his duty, and if the need came, he would do it again.

All the time his uncle was watching him, and Peter's stock went up still further. Most lads of his age would have been terribly swelled-headed, in the circumstances, but Peter didn't let it impress him too much. Nonetheless, he had a real thrill when, with his uncle on one side of him and Tim Allen on the other they were snapped time and time again standing in front of the *Pioneer*, and two cinematograph men took a film, while asking the young hero to speak.

This was too much for Peter. He laughed, and shook his head. James Lacre spoke a few, well-chosen words, barely mentioning the affair on the wing-tip. Then they were rescued from the hero-worshippers by officials.

Less than an hour after their arrival at Kabul, Graffhein and Clive left them, to start on the next hop.

It was, of course, a big help for the other fliers that they had been trouble-free, but both of them realised trouble might come at any moment. The *Pioneer* was doing well, and frequently it was all to the good to have the engines run over thoroughly at this stage in a big flight.

Peter was disappointed, however, when he learned there was a replacement part needed for the middle engine. Luckily, there was a spare at the aerodrome, but the fitting would take at least eight hours, and possibly twelve. They were forced, therefore, to accept the hospitality of the Aero Club—in reality the officers' club—in Kabul, for the night.

Peter slept well. He could hardly credit how tired he was. He seemed to be sleeping all the time. The others laughed at his comments, and assured him it was nothing unusual.

Before he went to sleep, Peter thought a great deal of the position of this wonderful race.

The *Pioneer* was number five, at the moment. Somewhere ahead, the *Haufman*, the *Granada*, the *Angel* and the *Deutchsland* were heading for Shanghai, the next official stopping place. All planes had to stop there, as they did at the other official bases on the route. In any case, it was impossible for any of the machines to take two hops at a go; no aeroplane could carry fuel enough to take it close on six thousand miles.

Peter's thoughts were mainly of the *Granada* and the *Haufman*. At the back of his mind was lurking the memory of the disaster at Heston, which had nearly kept the *Pioneer* out of the race. When would the next attempts to put the monoplane out of action come?

Of course, Peter realised, while the two suspect machines and pilots were in the lead, there was little to fear. If they won the race on their own merits—well, Peter wasn't going to grumble. But all the time he was afraid of the possibility of trouble that might come out of the blue.

But he could do nothing.

As he went to sleep, however, he realised that there were two other pilots in greater danger than the men on the *Pioneer*.

Clive and Graffhein were on the leaders' heels. They were more likely to suffer from an attempt to cripple them at the moment, than the *Pioneer*.

At breakfast next morning, Peter mentioned this to his uncle.

"I know," said James Lacre, grimly. "But I've warned both Clive and Graffhein. They're on the look out for trouble, young 'un. So are we."

Peter grinned cheerfully; secretly he had been worried, lest the two competitors who he was sure were running a straight race should be unwarned. With that load off his mind, he asked anxiously about the repairs and overhaul on the *Pioneer*.

"Almost ready," said Tim Allen, who entered

the breakfast room at that moment. He had been to the field, and seen the monoplane. "We'll be off at seven sharp, Jimmy—that's if the young hero doesn't keep us waiting while he signs autographs!"

Peter coloured and grinned, but he understood the reference to his bravery on the previous day when he saw a copy of the only English paper printed in Kabul. It was a small sheet, but the front page was filled with news of the great race—and most of it was taken up with a photograph of the *Pioneer* and its pilots, with the caption:

"BOY FLIER SAVES THREE LIVES."
"DARING REPAIR WHILE 'PLANE WAS FLYING."

It was very exciting, and again Peter thrilled to think he was in the news, like that. But it did nothing at all to allay his eagerness to get on with the next stage.

After the luxury of hot baths, they went to the air-field.

The *Pioneer*, completely overhauled, was all ready for them. From chance remarks, Peter learned that his uncle and Tim Allen had been up most of the night, superintending the work. That explained the dark rings under their eyes, and he told himself it was up to him to let them have plenty of sleep during the trip. He was thoroughly refreshed, and he felt better than he had done at any time since leaving London.

For the third time, the *Pioneer* made a perfect take-off. Now the droning of the three

engines was like music in Peter's ears. It wasn't likely that they would develop trouble again, on this hop.

They were soon out of sight of Kabul, and they started talking among themselves, cheerfully. But now, for the first time Peter realised that this hop was certainly the worst of the overland jumps they would take.

They would first cross a wild patch of Northern India, and then they would be across Tibet, and into China. All the way from Kabul to Shanghai was over jungle country or mountains. Hardly any part of the land beneath was fully explored, and in many places it was probable that no human being had ever walked. At others, especially in Tibet and China, the only people there were half-savage Chinese and Tibetan brigands, who made long, marauding trips across the land from time to time, holding missionaries and others to ransom.

Peter had read many newspaper stories of the terrible things these brigands were capable of doing. Few of their victims ever escaped alive. The chances of safety, if anything happened to force them down, was very small.

There were no towns of any size, and to the best of the aviators' knowledge, there was no landing field before they reached Sian, about five hundred miles from Shanghai itself. It were possible, of course, to take a longer route and make several stops before reaching the Chinese seaport, but the *Pioneer* was not taking that course. Non-stop Shanghai was their motto.

Three hours out of Kabul they ran into heavy rain.

It was the first heavy rain they had met since the start of the trip, and in that respect they had been exceptionally lucky. Now it came down in torrents, and with it there was a high, squally wind, that buffeted the monoplane almost as badly as the whirlwind they had fought against over Turkey. To make it worse, the rain caused a thick mist below them, and for over two hours they were flying blind.

This part of the world was uncharted. There were no reliable maps to tell of the highest points of the mountains, and it was a gamble, pure and simple. Every minute there was the possibility that they would run against a peak.

But they did not allow themselves to think of the possibility.

True to his word, Peter sat at the controls for a long time. At first the rain, the wind and the mist made him nervous, but he soon grew accustomed to the strange swaying of the monoplane, and he grew skilful in fighting the pranks of the wind. Sometimes he would be forced to nose-dive, sometimes a gust of terrific fury would send him into a tail-spin from which it seemed there was no escape. But he battled on.

All the time, of course, one of the others was behind him, but they were leaving the job to him. They could, in emergency, take the controls in a split-second, but until such desperate emergency cropped up, they were eager for Peter to carry on.

With compressed lips and narrowed eyes he went on and on. It seemed the rain would never stop. It was coming down like sheets, hissing against the windows of the cabin, dripping in continual rivulets from the wings and the fuselage. Sometimes the wind would carry it against the body with a rattle that sounded like the firing of machine-guns.

And then, ahead of them, there was a grey light spreading—a greyness which meant the black clouds were coming to an end. He had come through successfully.

"Good going, Peter," said James Lacre, as he squeezed his way along to relieve the lad. "You have a nap, now."

Peter wasn't sorry. He ate a sandwich, sipped a little hot coffee from a thermos-cup, and dozed off.

He was awakened an hour afterwards by a terrific shout from Tim Allen, and an oath from his uncle. It was very rare that James Lacre swore, and Peter jumped up quickly.

And as he stared ahead of him he went white to the lips!

For the *Pioneer* was forcing its nose out of a bank of clouds, and it seemed they were within a few feet of the summit of a snow-capped mountain!

There was nothing Peter could do. He stood and waited.

James Lacre had seen that snow-clad peak a fraction of a second before Tim Allen. Almost on the moment of spotting it, he wrenched over the stick, and pushed the monoplane into

a steep climb. The 'plane seemed as if it would turn right over, but Lacre handled it perfectly.

It was rising at an angle of more than sixty degrees, now, but still they were flying at a speed of over a hundred and fifty miles an hour towards the mountain!

It seemed there was no hope for them!

Like a great white mist, the snow was in front of them. They could not judge the distance well, for the whiteness made it deceptive. But all three tensed their muscles. At any moment the crash might come!

But the *Pioneer* went on, up—up—up, almost perpendicular now, flying at an incredible angle. Not one pilot in a thousand would have risked it. The slightest miscalculation would send them over in loop—and before they dropped low enough to straighten out, they would crash.

The seconds seemed like hours.

The vast expanse of whiteness rushed beneath them, as if it would never end. And all the time James Lacre kept his stick right over, climbing as steeply as he dared.

And then, with a suddenness that left them gasping, the whiteness dropped away.

Now they were flying towards the clear, blue sky. The danger was past!

There was a tightness in Peter's chest, and his limbs ached. He hardly realised how tensely he had waited for the fatal moment. But now it was over, he forced a smile, and looked behind him. He gasped again as he saw how the peak of the mountain towered towards the

heavens—and he saw the bank of clouds on the far side, through which they had nearly crashed to eternity.

"Lucky for us it broke when it did," said James Lacre, with a little laugh. "Another ten yards of that cloud, my lads, and we'd have been in Kingdom Come. But we aren't going to worry about it now. Peter, my hero, fetch me a sip of coffee, will you? I'm getting cold."

Peter obeyed at once. Both pilots sipped the steaming coffee, and Peter himself wasn't sorry to have a little. There was a shivery feeling running up and down his back that made him realise how near to death he had been. This was the reaction.

But one of the amazing things he learned about that flight was the ease with which narrow escapes were forgotten.

He knew now why airmen were such a clear-eyed race of men, and why they laughed so often. They had to be equipped with a strange streak of coolness, that enabled them to laugh and joke in any circumstances. They had to be able to change from laughter to grimness in a flash, they had to be ready to fight with death at any moment. And if they brooded about it, afterwards, they were useless in the air. They *had* to forget.

That night, for the first time, the *Pioneer* was forced to alter its course a little. A strong wind was blowing that would have reduced their speed considerably if they had tried to cut through it, and James Lacre decided to

add another two or three hundred miles to the length of the run rather than fight the wind.

Over this unexplored country, they had very few landmarks to guide them, but here and there they were able to judge their position, and confirm their estimated locality.

It was soon after dawn on the next day that they first saw the 'plane in front of them.

It was a long way ahead, and only the remarkable visibility enabled them to see it at all. Just a speck in the distance, they followed it for hour after hour.

At seven o'clock, after twenty-four hours' flying from Kabul, they estimated they were within five or six hundred miles of Shanghai. This time they had no trouble at all with their engines, which had ticked over perfectly from the start.

"I wonder who it is?" Peter said, after they had followed the other 'plane for at least two hours.

"I should say it's certain no one's passed us, from Kabul," said his uncle, "and that means it's the German, Clive, or one of the other two leaders. I think we're catching it. We'll be able to recognise the 'bus soon."

Peter, unused to judging distances in the air, wasn't sure whether to expect to catch the other 'plane up or not, but he soon realised his uncle had been right. At half-past eight they were within a few hundred yards of the other. Tim Allen called out:

"That's the *Angel*."

After a few minutes, Peter saw the lines of the monoplane clearly. And he saw something else. The *Angel* was "limping"—dipping up and down, as if it was running on only one engine.

Whether or no Clive or his fellow-pilots saw the *Pioneer* Peter didn't know, but he smiled as the leading 'plane picked up a little, and went further ahead. James Lacre and Tim Allen chuckled, too.

"We'll teach him," laughed the older man. "I——"

And then James Lacre stopped talking, and went white.

For out of a bank of clouds above the two machines, a third 'plane swooped. It flashed down, and they saw its brilliant yellow body, knowing in a flash who it was.

Ricardo, in the *Granada!*

Peter stared, with the others. All of them guessed there would be trouble, but they had no idea how it would develop. But they *knew*, in that moment, their suspicions of the Spanish pilot had been founded on fact.

Then, without a second's warning, something stabbed out from the *Granada*, towards the *Angel*.

It was a single stab of flame, followed quickly by two or three others. Peter hardly realised what they were, until his uncle rasped out in a strange voice:

"*He's shooting!*"

CHAPTER IX

A FIGHT IN THE AIR

JAMES LACRE was right.

Ricardo was firing at the *Angel*, and there would be only one reason for it. He was intending to bring the monoplane down. The whole plot seemed to stretch out in Peter's mind. He realised the dreadful cunning of it, and he felt sick.

If a 'plane crashed here, while flying over jungle and swamps, the chances of it ever being seen again by human eyes were remote in the extreme. Over Europe, which they had crossed, or over the United States, which they hoped to fly, a machine would be found, and any signs of foul play, such as bullet marks, would be recognised. But here the rogue in the yellow biplane could safely shoot, and rely on his grim secret never being found out.

It was a vile plot, and it revealed even more fully the absolute unscrupulousness of the Spaniard.

Obviously he had been flying high, watching for the other 'planes, waiting for the moment to pounce. He must have cursed the fact that the *Pioneer* and the *Angel* were so close together, but that fact had not deterred him.

Like a man in a dream, Peter Grey watched that dreadful fight in the air.

After the first few seconds, he saw Clive, or one of his colleagues, was firing back. Two lots of flame stabbed through the air now, but the *Granada* was obviously more prepared for the battle. Clive's men were probably armed with automatic pistols, but Ricardo had a machine-gun on board!

The helpless men in the *Pioneer* could see the sharp stabs of flame that came out, one after the other in quick succession. In front of their eyes they saw some of the fuselage of the *Angel* break loose. It had been severed by the bullets, and was floating behind the monoplane.

Then the *Granada* swooped upwards, out of range of the automatics. It was a smaller 'plane than Clive's, and more easily manœuvred. For a few seconds it flew over its victim, and then it banked, and again they could see the stabs of flame.

Ricardo was firing downwards!

The fight could not have lasted more than a minute when James Lacre spoke again, but it seemed interminable. His voice came clearly, and very harsh:

"Peter. Open those two boxes labelled 'G'."

Peter obeyed, quickly. The boxes were fastened, like the rest of the small luggage, to the sides of the cabin. They were more like little cupboards than anything else. He was not surprised when he found four small, dull grey automatic pistols in them, and a good supply of ammunition.

The pilots had to be prepared, of course, for a forced descent among hostile tribesmen, but when those weapons had been packed, no one had dreamed of the use to which they would be put.

Peter handed two guns to his uncle, and two to Tim Allen. Then James Lacre snapped:

"Take my place. Let her all out, and bank when I tell you."

Peter nodded.

The *Pioneer* tore through the air at over two hundred miles an hour, and all the time the battle in front was being waged, growing more desperate every minute. For now it was obvious that the *Angel* was in a bad way.

Less than two hundred feet separated the three machines when the yellow *Granada* swooped like a bird of prey on to the monoplane. Now the sharp rat-tat-tat-tat of machine-gun fire could be heard.

Peter didn't see what happened, but he did see the *Angel* drop into a tail-spin.

It was a ghastly spectacle.

The great monoplane went down and down, spinning round and round on its nose, dropping to the earth—and the drop meant death. But before it had reached the ground, the men in the *Pioneer* were forced to look away from it.

Ricardo was after them!

The yellow machine, superbly piloted, banked and got on top of the *Pioneer*. As it went up, James Lacre snapped:

"*Spin!*"

Peter dropped into a tail-spin without hesitating. He went down for three hundred feet, and then rightened the 'plane.

"*Bank!*" snapped his uncle.

Peter banked, and then slipped into a climb. It was a smart piece of work, and left the *Granada* behind them, in the middle of a turn. James Lacre said nothing. Tight-lipped, he opened one of the doors, and fired.

The snap of the shot echoed through the cabin. Flame stabbed from the gun. A bullet whipped across the air towards the Spanish 'plane, a third, a fourth! Lacre emptied his gun, and swung round to Allen.

"At him, Tim!"

Tim jumped into position, but by now the *Granada* had recovered, and was climbing. Whether it was hit or not the others couldn't say. Before they had time to think, a rattle of bullets sounded on the cabin above their heads, and then the ceiling-glass smashed and bullets cracked in.

The first smashed into the wireless set. It wrecked it completely. Pieces of brass flew through the air, and a jagged lump of metal scored a wound through Peter's cheek. But he hardly felt it as, for a second time, and without being told, now, he dropped into a tail-spin.

The *Granada* was still above them, but they were temporarily out of the danger zone.

"Any damage?" snapped James Lacre.

"Radio's gone," said Peter. "Nothing else."

It was true, for the other machine-gun bullets

had bitten harmlessly into the floor of the cabin. So far they were not badly hurt.

James Lacre might have decided to make a run for it. He had a faster limit speed than Ricardo, so far as he knew. On the other hand the Spanish 'plane might be unexpectedly fast, and once he concentrated on getting away, there was no telling what might happen. And, all the time, there was the possibility that the *Haufman* might be lying in wait, somewhere ahead.

But they were not the things that decided James Lacre to stay and fight.

He was filled with a mad anger against the criminals who had sent the *Angel* crashing to its doom. It was murder—and murder in one of the worst forms conceivable. James Lacre expressed the feelings of the others as he snapped:

"We'll have him down! Or we'll go out ourselves!"

For Ricardo was worthy of no better fate than to follow the *Angel* in that terrible, downwards run.

Peter manœuvred quickly. For a second time the *Granada* was behind them, in a turn. Again Lacre emptied his gun at the biplane, and Tim Allen followed suit. They knew, this time, they had scored several hits, but they had no idea how much damage had been done.

It wasn't enough, they discovered quickly.

The biplane completed its turn and this time, instead of climbing, raced to the side of the *Pioneer*, which was on a half turn. In a

few seconds Ricardo was on a level with them. They could see him, with his swarthy, sharp-featured face, at the gun which was poking out of the side of his machine.

Peter saw the flashes of yellow flame, and heard the rat-tat-tat-tat of the firing. At the same time he heard the cracks of the two automatics, and the acrid smell of cordite bit into his nostrils. A faint, blue smoke filled the cabin.

Bullets smashed through the windows, drilling small holes in the safety glass, but providence was on their side. No serious damage was done; the bullets passed right across the cabin.

In front of their eyes, they saw Ricardo snatch one hand off his gun.

James Lacre grunted with satisfaction when he saw the blood streaming from the wound in the Spaniard's hand. They'd damaged him.

They couldn't see the pilot of the *Granada*, but they did know there were only two men on board. That meant they had to fight one wounded man, and a pilot whose qualities they didn't know. They realised, however, that he must be of the same murderous type as Ricardo.

They had no time to think of men, however. They were still in danger, for Ricardo, after the first moment of inaction, came back to his gun. Peter climbed quickly, to get out of range.

It was the right thing to do, and nine times out of ten it would have succeeded in its purpose. But this time it failed.

Ricardo was out of sight, now, but they heard the rattle of the gun again, and they

felt the bullets pecking into the bottom of the carriage. At first it seemed that they were not hit. They might have continued to try and sight the Spaniard, but for the fact that James Lacre leaned out, quickly, to try and see just where the *Granada* was.

He glanced downwards.

Then he drew back, quickly, his face white.

For he had seen a thin trickle of petrol falling from the *Pioneer* and he didn't need telling twice what was the matter.

"Petrol tank's holed," he said in a low, grim voice that filled the cabin. "And that's cooked us, boys."

There was a tense silence in the cabin of the monoplane.

If this had happened at the beginning of the journey, they might still have had a chance, for they had two tanks. But the first was empty, now, and the second had a bullet-hole in it.

"Glide," snapped Lacre.

Peter shut off the engines, quickly, and the monoplane, filled with a strange silence, began to glide towards the distant earth. The lad knew that the glide would bring the pressure of the air to bear on the hole in the tank, and that for a while it would not run. He saw in a glance their only chance was to keep gliding, until they were close enough to the ground to prospect for a landing place. If they had luck, they would have enough petrol in the tank to keep going for perhaps ten minutes. Certainly they could last no longer than that.

And even then, it depended on whether the *Granada* allowed them to go.

Risking bullets, James Lacre looked outwards and upwards. He saw the yellow biplane several hundred feet above them. It looked as if Ricardo was waiting to see whether this was a new piece of trickery on the part of the monoplane.

Then the famous ace realised something else.

One of the biplane's engines was missing badly. The Spaniard was in trouble!

If it had happened a few minutes before, it might have saved the *Pioneer* and now, although it was of no practical advantage, it gave all three a fierce satisfaction. They had not let the dastardly attacker escape without damage.

A few seconds later they saw the yellow biplane making east, towards Shanghai. Obviously Ricardo was going to chance the likelihood of the monoplane tricking him. Moreover, the *Granada* was limping badly; it would be in a bad way when it reached the seaport, if it ever succeeded in getting there.

But on the *Pioneer* they were quickly forced to consider their own predicament.

"See anything likely?" James Lacre asked his nephew.

Peter hesitated. They were three or four hundred feet up, and he believed he could see a stretch of country that was bare of trees and rocks. It was impossible, of course, for them to judge whether it was level. Providing it

was free of obstacles, that was the main thing. The rest would have to be left to chance.

"I think we can make it," Peter said at last.

"Try," said his uncle, grimly.

To get down more quickly, Peter switched one of the engines on. It ticked over for a few seconds, and then spluttered out. That was final proof they were out of petrol. If they didn't make land, they'd crash.

Peter handled the machine like an old hand. He coasted down, slowly, thinking only of the landing. The stretch of bare country seemed larger than it had been at first, and he had little doubt they would be able to get down without turning over.

Down they went. The earth seemed to be coming up to meet them. Without the engines to keep the pace, it was a terribly tricky piece of work, but not for a moment did Peter falter.

Twenty feet away—ten—five.

The wheels bumped on the ground. For a moment Peter had a dreadful thought that the machine would overturn. It lurched sickeningly.

And then it righted itself, and it was running along the bumpy, barren earth.

CHAPTER X

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

THEY were down, and they were safe.

Despite the murderous attempts of the Spaniard to kill them, to send them crashing in flames, the three pilots of the *Pioneer* had escaped that fate. But apart from the fact of their safety, there was little they could enthuse about.

There was, however, one other bright spot in their plight.

They were on a peculiar long, narrow stretch of land, like an oblong table or plateau, which was remarkably level. There was ample room for a take-off, and they knew their chance of living depended on rescue from the air. At least that chance was a substantial one, for the plateau was, of course, raised and it was dry. They could see, all about them, jungle and forest, but the place where they had landed had not a single tree or bush.

It was not this phenomenon on which their thoughts centred however. They were thinking, grimly, of their plight.

They were out of the race. Not one of them thought for a moment they would have the slightest chance of taking further part in the flight round the world. Whether it would be

won by the murderous Spaniard or not, and whether the real truth of the encounters in the air would ever be disclosed, only the future could tell. For the present, they were surrounded by dense jungle, and they had food enough to last them only for ten or fourteen days.

During the first five minutes they walked, silently, round the *Pioneer*. As the landing had been perfect, it was not damaged in any way, apart from the havoc the machine-gun bullets had created—and that was bad enough.

There were four holes drilled in the petrol tank; there was not a whole pane of glass left in the windows, and the radio—their main chance of contacting with the outside world—was smashed beyond repair. The fuselage of the monoplane had, happily, been hardly damaged, and there was only one bullet-hole in the wings.

At last James Lacre laughed, a little harshly, and gave his nephew a playful punch in the ribs.

"You're having plenty of fun this time," he said. "Well, how would you like to be a pilot in the next war, Peter?"

Peter smiled a little ruefully.

"Not much," he admitted. "But I'd like another shot at Ricardo, Uncle."

"And you're not the only one," said Tim Allen, with a scowl. "I'd like to wring that gentleman's neck, and hear him scream while I was doing it."

"Which is very pleasant to think about," smiled James Lacre, "but it doesn't get us very far."

"There doesn't seem much chance of getting very far in any case," said Allen, laughing.

As always, the men were cheerful, and Peter was certainly not downhearted.

"Is there any chance of being found by natives?" he asked, looking right and left but being unable to see further than a few yards into the dense, green jungle that surrounded them.

"Always a chance," said his uncle.

"I was thinking," said Peter, grinning, "that they'd get a shock if they happened to see three aviators in their kit dancing about this table top. It's just like a table, isn't it?"

The others nodded.

All of them realised that they cut queer figures in this place. They had their blue overalls on—they always flew in them—and they looked exactly as they had done, twenty-four hours before, when they had stepped into the *Pioneer* at Kabul.

Peter thought of this, and at the same time remembered the tall, smiling Clive.

Clive had been forced down, not far from here, and it was almost certain that he had crashed to death. It was a horrible thought. Peter tried to get it out of his mind.

And then, suddenly, he exclaimed aloud:

"Great Scott! I didn't think of that!"

"Think of what?" asked Lacre, smiling. Tim Allen winked and grunted:

"It's no use climbing on the wing this time, my young fighting cock. You can only be a hero *once* in your life."

But Peter was too excited to heed their jokes.

"Don't you see," he burst out, "we didn't notice any flame from the *Angel* when she came down. And we must have seen them if there had been any. She fell just about where we were fighting!"

There was an absolute silence after Peter stopped. None of them had realised it before, but now they remembered they had searched the whole of the surrounding countryside as they had glided down looking for the landing place, and Peter was certainly right when he said they would have seen flames, if the fire had been in existence.

So they knew, as nearly definitely as was possible, that the *Angel* had not caught fire.

To experienced airmen, there was a lot more behind that apparent fact than there seemed to be.

They knew that nine times out of ten a crash meant a fire. The engine would smash, on hitting the ground, and the flames would shoot out, to explode the petrol flooding from the smashed tank. It was very rare indeed that a real crash ended in anything but a fiery inferno.

"Great Scott!" gasped James Lacre, after the first startled silence. "So that means they might not have crashed!"

"Clive might have made a landing," cried Peter.

"He'd manage it, if any man living could," said Tim Allen.

All three stared at each other, excitedly. Although they had said very little about it, they felt very badly for the victims, as they had assumed, of the smash. But now their hearts leapt at the possibility that Clive, in the *Angel*, had made as successful a landing as the *Pioneer*.

"Let's get busy," said James Lacre, after another pause. "There's one thing, we can't be afraid of the old 'bus running away from us. We'll make up a search-party of three. Peter, you thought of it, so you decide which way we go."

Peter laughed a little.

"I can't imagine where," he admitted. "I rather think we landed east of the place where we had the fight. So the *Angel* ought to be west."

"Get a compass from the 'plane," said his uncle, "and bring the whisky, in case of accidents."

The pilots had not touched a drop of spirits from the moment they had left London, for the alcohol affected their nerves very quickly. Even a little drop, that would have mattered nothing at all on the land, was sufficient to rob the eyes, the brain and the hands of working together in that close co-operation that was essential for long-distance flying. But they carried a supply of whisky and brandy, for emergency use.

Peter hurried to the *Pioneer*—excited at the prospect of finding the men of the *Angel* alive, when a sound travelled through the air that brought him to a standstill.

For a moment he could hardly believe his ears, but when the cry came again, and his uncle and Tim Allen shouted back, he knew his ears had not been deceiving him.

"Hallo, there!" came the voice. "*Pioneer* ahead!"

It was the voice of Clive!

A few minutes later they saw the airman breaking through a little belt of forest that surrounded the plateau on which they were standing. Clive's tall figure pushed through the undergrowth and in a few minutes he was jumping up to the piece of raised ground, and the three *Pioneer* men were rushing towards him.

All four were laughing like schoolboys. They rung each others hands, time and time again. For in both cases it was as if they had been raised from the dead.

"What's happened to your other men?" James Lacre asked at last. "And the 'bus?"

"Everything and everyone's O.K.," said Clive. "Or at least, as fit as we can expect. The engine's cracked, and we had to come down, but I managed to glide. The others jumped, and landed safely within a few hundred yards of each other. They're at the *Angel* now, while I'm doing a bit of scouting."

"You saw us, of course," said Tim.

"Yes—and a neat job you made of it. Well, we reckon we can account ourselves the luckiest half a dozen fliers on God's earth, Lacre. How we've escaped a miracle——"

"I know one man who'll be very sorry about it," said James Lacre, very grimly.

As a result of his words, the others stopped laughing.

They thought, very suddenly, of the swarthy Ricardo, and all he had tried to do. If his schemes had worked out as he had expected, all six men would have been dead, now. Peter was aghast at the depths of human villainy, and he knew the others were very nearly as appalled as he was himself.

"Well," said Clive at last, "we'll have to think about him later. Are we coming to your house, or are you coming to ours?"

A chuckle followed this remark, and a little discussion. It appeared that the *Angel* was about a mile from the plateau, and there was a fairly good path through the forest to it. The whole of the surrounding country was fairly high, and so far as Clive had discovered, there was no fear of swamps.

There was, however, the ever-present danger of meeting wild beasts. But all the men were armed, with the exception of Peter. His uncle tapped his shoulder. Peter looked down, to see the other offering him an automatic.

"Yours," he said, "in case you need it. Hold tight to it, young 'un, and don't forget it's loaded."

"You bet I will," said Peter Grey.

He felt excited at the thought that he had a gun in his pocket, for the first time in his life, and from time to time he patted the bulge it made in his coat pocket. Certainly it had a reassuring touch. He felt he could tackle any likely danger with it to help him.

"We still haven't settled whose house we're going to stay at," Tim Allen reminded them.

"Anyone got any ideas?" asked Clive.

"Better come here," said Lacre, reasonably. "We can light a fire, and being on a table, in effect, we can keep watch better than if we're in the forest."

"I'll go and collect the others," said Clive.

Peter had been thinking hard about the discussion, and he decided, suddenly, to speak. He felt awkward, for he was still not used to being acknowledged by men whose names were household words as an equal.

"I rather think we ought to go to Mr. Clive's 'bus," he said quietly.

His uncle chuckled.

"The lad's hatching a scheme," he said. "Out with it, Peter. What's on your mind?"

"I'd rather not say," said Peter, simply, "but I *have* an idea, Uncle. I'd rather think about it before I say anything, though, if you don't mind."

"Let the Muse ponder the question," laughed Clive. He tucked his arm into Peter's. "Come on, then. You deserve a chance, and we can all go through the forest together. After all, there's safety in numbers. If your idea doesn't blossom, we can come back."

Amid a general chuckle, the four of them left the *Pioneer* and began their walk. The forest was surprisingly thin in parts, and while the actual walk took them half an hour, it was easy going, although several times they were forced to make a detour.

The two colleagues of Clive were young men, both cheerful and pleased with the way their luck had turned. Peter took to them immediately. One, named Peters, was a short, stocky man of twenty-five, with a wealth of coal-black hair and a pair of merry blue eyes that seemed to laugh all the time. The other, Pendall, was tall and thin—although Clive topped him by two inches—and his eyes were brown. He was on the quiet side, but every now and again he would burst out with a little rejoinder, or wisecrack, that sent them all chuckling.

The first thing Peter did, when they reached the little clearing where the *Angel* had landed, was to go up to the wrecked machine. He smiled a little to himself when he remembered Clive had said everything was O.K. It was almost certain that the *Angel* would never fly again. It's engines were peppered with bullets and, although they could have been repaired at a flying field, it would be almost impossible to bring the spares out to this place. Now—the brave old 'plane was doomed.

"There he goes," James Lacre called out, as he espied Peter looking round the 'bus. "Got that idea worked out yet, young 'un?"

Peter looked at them all, and smiled. He felt nervous, for he wasn't sure he was on safe ground, but he said:

"I think if Mr. Clive helped us, we could get the *Pioneer* up again," he said, quietly.

There was consternation as he stopped. All five men stared at him as though he had sent

a bomb in their midst. Of course, he knew they would have thought of the same thing eventually, but they had all taken it for granted that they were finished, so far as the World Race was concerned. But all the time Peter, with his youthful optimism, had told himself there *might* be a chance.

"Come on, Magician," said his uncle at last.

"Well," said Peter. "I've looked at the *Angel's* petrol tank, and it isn't damaged. The *Pioneer* is all right, apart from the tank. I think we could repair it, however, if we had some petrol to put in it."

"Good Lord!" gasped Clive. "It's a brain-wave all right!"

"But how are we going to get the petrol to the plateau?" asked Tim Allen, who was almost hopping with excitement.

"It ought to be easy enough," said Peter. "I've been thinking about it since we came down—in the hope that this tank would be all right. First we can take this tank off—it won't be hard—and then we can rig up some kind of a barrow, with the wheels to run it on. There's quite a good path through the forest, and I don't see why we shouldn't be up again in two or three hours."

Again there was a short silence. And then there was a chorus of agreement. With a will, all five men and Peter started to work at the petrol tank, which came out easily, as they had all the wrenches and spanners needed. Luckily, the *Angel* had not started to use its emergency

tank, and there were fifteen hundred gallons of spirit in it.

Clive was spontaneous in his decision to let the *Pioneer* take this chance of re-starting the flight. As he pointed out, the *Angel* was done for, and it would be meanness for him to raise any objection.

As they worked, however, they found Peter's estimate of the time required would be badly out. The petrol tank was extremely heavy, and it was necessary to hack down a number of small trees, to act as levers. All the 'planes in the race were equipped with axes, however, for the possibility of a descent in wooded country was great, and they made good progress.

Luckily, it did not get dark until late, and at last their Herculean efforts were rewarded. On the rubber-tyred wheels taken from the *Angel* a small platform was built of young trees and five hours after the landing, the new tank was on the plateau. Another hour would see the *Pioneer* up again.

Darkness was coming now, however, and they had to use some of the precious petrol to make flares with. At last, however, everything was ready.

The *Pioneer's* men had arranged for Clive to keep a flare burning, night and day. As soon as the monoplane reached Shanghai other 'planes would set out to the rescue. It would not be more than twenty-four hours, with normal fortune, for the rescue 'plane to arrive. In case of accidents, however, the *Pioneer's* crew left all but a small quantity of their food

with Clive, Peters and Pendall. The men shook hands.

But before James Lacre had stepped into the cabin, something happened.

It came with devastating suddenness, and for a few seconds none of them knew what to make of it.

As though from nowhere there came the report of an explosion, and a few seconds later —or so it seemed—something rattled against the sides of the *Pioneer*, and bit into the men's clothes. Pendall exclaimed, for he had been hit in the face.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed.

"Steady," snapped James Lacre, who recovered first from the shock. "There's someone about with an old blunderbuss; that stuff's bucket-shot, or my name's not Lacre!"

Bucket-shot—small iron pellets used in the oldest of guns! It seemed impossible.

But Peter Grey, his eyes gleaming with excitement, gasped out the words that explained it—the words that had been in the minds of all of them.

"Chinese bandits!" he gasped. "We're being attacked!"

CHAPTER XI

CHO-LING-CHO'S BAND

ALL thought of the flight disappeared from the minds of the six Europeans who were gathered round the *Pioneer*. In a trice James Lacre assumed control of the little party, all of whom had drawn their guns at the first moment of realization.

"Put the fire out," snapped Lacre. "They can see us in the light."

Peter and Tim Allen were nearest the big camp fire that had been lit to protect them from the attentions of wild beasts. But they had no easy task, for the fire had been made of cut logs soaked in petrol. Neither of them hesitated, however. They plunged towards the flames, scattering the logs and red-hot embers right and left as they kicked out. In a few seconds small fires, with yellow flames shooting two or three feet into the air, were spread all about the plateau.

James Lacre and Clive stopped by the *Pioneer*. The other two pilots hurried to the assistance of Peter and Tim. Heedless of the danger of flying bullets, they stamped these little fires out, although their clothes were singed and once a flame burst up to such a height that Peter felt the hair at the back of his head

sizzle. He jumped away in time to avoid any serious damage, however, and looking round, saw that now only a few glowing embers remained. They gave off little or no light.

"That's the first danger over," grunted Tim, from close by Peter. "Let's get back to the 'bus, young 'un."

It was easier said than done.

The plateau stretched for over a mile, although it was little more than a hundred yards wide. All of it was shrouded in an impenetrable darkness. The *Pioneer* was invisible. Not even the faintest of outlines showed up against the sky.

They had to rely on instinct to guide them, for in that mad rush to put the fires out they had wandered a long way from the aeroplane. In the first place, of course, the fire had been built well away from the machine, to avoid the danger of the *Pioneer* catching alight.

Stepping softly—no easy task on the hard, barren ground, they went on. They could hear no voices, but now and again an explosion rent the silence. It seemed to deafen them, and the echoes of it shivered through the chill night air.

"What a row!" muttered Peter.

"That's the kind of noise they used to have in the old days," grunted Tim Allen. "A battle must have been a noisy game then."

"One thing," said the lad, "we can see where they are."

It was true.

Although they had to rely on their own sense of direction to reach the *Pioneer*, the flashes from the shot-guns—or blunderbusses used by these Chinese bandits—illuminated a comparatively wide area of the jungle. But that was all it did do.

The attackers fought with native cunning. They were absolutely hidden by the jungle, and although the bursts of flame as they fired were bright enough, it merely showed the traceries of the trees and undergrowth in a strange relief. And in a few minutes Peter realised the bandits were moving from place to place.

It was a terrible predicament, and anyone with nerves would have been frightened out of their lives. But Peter's nerves had been well-tested, and Tim Allen seemed to treat this affair as a joke—as he always did.

In truth, there was little humour in the situation, which was full of danger. The airmen realised in a vague way what had happened—and they were right; Chinese pirates or brigands had seen them, and had surrounded the plateau intending to make the airmen prisoners. But they had no idea of the strength of the attacking party, and unaccustomed to the darkness and the countryside, they were in a hopeless plight. Their automatics would help them in broad daylight, of course, but in the darkness they were of little use. It was foolish to fire towards the flashes, for they guessed that as soon as a shot had been fired,

the bandit would move away. They could not tell whether he moved right or left.

This then, was their own estimate of the situation.

They did not know that, being comparatively close to the coast—they were actually only four hundred miles from Shanghai, and in China four hundred miles is a mere trifle—they had been surrounded by members of a particularly large band of marauders.

The leader of this band was Cho-Ling-Cho, at one time an officer in the Chinese Army. He had deserted, and had organised his bandit gang, realising he could make more money out of it than by soldiering. Cho-Ling-Cho's band was well-armed, and disciplined, although it was made up of the worst elements of the Chinese army, and many small rogues who had realised they would be safer under the leadership of Cho-Ling-Cho than roaming the country by themselves.

This band of cut-throats, thieves, and vagabonds had seen the two aeroplanes come down, and immediately their thoughts had turned to that of looting. There were often big prizes to be gained from a wrecked aeroplane. If it did not burn, there were the bodies of the men to rob, and all the fitting and the guns that were always carried, to be stolen. If by chance any of the airmen had escaped with their lives, there was a fatter reward than ever for the bandits.

Ransom!

The Chinese realised that Europeans would

pay dearly for the safety of their friends, and they never missed an opportunity of holding white men and women prisoners.

That night, in the light of the fire near the *Pioneer* they had seen what seemed to them inconceivable. Not just one or two white men, but six!

It was a red-letter day in Cho-Ling-Cho's life, but the situation had one bad point—so far as he was concerned.

Although he was near the plateau in person, he had only a dozen of his men with him, and as bad luck would have it, they were armed only with the old-fashioned blunderbusses that comprised most of the weapons of the band. The leader himself had started the day with a modern rifle, but a few hours before darkness he had stumbled in a stream, and the rifle had fallen. In trying to get it out the barrel had been bent almost at right-angles, after catching between two submerged stones, and the rifle was not only damp, but it was quite useless until the barrel could be straightened out.

Cho-Ling-Cho had immediately sent two runners through the jungle, to contact with the main force of the band. Then he put his men at various strategic points, round the plateau.

All this time he had been helped by the light from the petrol flares. His men had moved with absolute silence, and there had been no warning at all for the six white men until Cho-Ling-Cho decided to open fire.

He did not want to kill these men, if he could help it. He wanted to capture them alive—and he realised that six white men, with automatics, would be more than a match in a mass attack for the ten Chinese who remained. So Cho-Ling-Cho's idea was to keep the airmen on the plateau until his reinforcements arrived. He reckoned the main part of his army would be here by noon on the following day, and he did not doubt his ability to keep the six men here for the necessary time.

It had been a disappointment when the fire had been put out, for the Chinese could not see what their enemies were doing. But they were used to the jungle, and darkness. The odds were still heavily in their favour.

Moreover, it enabled Cho-Ling-Cho to get nearer the plateau.

With three of his men, he crept forward, under the cover of darkness. He had no idea where the *Pioneer* was, but his eyes would pick out the outlines of the 'plane soon.

But before he saw it, he heard the mutter of voices—English voices.

Cho-Ling-Cho's slanting eyes glistened in the darkness. He muttered an order to his men, and all four of them stood absolutely still for a minute. Through the silence they could hear the occasional fall of footsteps, and now and again the same mutter of voices.

The bandit leader murmured his orders, smiling cruelly all the time. His men would surround these two or three white men who had wandered so far from their friends!

Meanwhile, Peter and Tim Allen realised they were lost.

One thing was a relief. They knew they would not be able to wander off the plateau. They would know immediately their feet touched the soft grass of the forest and jungle which, near the edge of the plateau, was very little different from a thick English wood, or copse.

They had no idea they were being surrounded, for they could still see nothing. But suddenly there was a rush of feet, and before they could draw their guns they had been attacked!

In the first moment, a small, lithe Chinese crashed a heavy stick on the back of Tim Allen's head. Tim uttered a single cry, and doubled up. Peter heard him fall, and he knew he was absolutely alone in the midst of the enemy!

He fought like a madman, shouting all the time to attract his uncle and the others, and he heard their cries echoing back. But before they were anywhere near him, something smashed down on the back of his head.

Peter felt a terrible pain, and it seemed as if a sheet of red flame went through his brain. Then there was a roaring, like a distant waterfall, in his ears. He staggered. He was no longer able to fight.

Hardly conscious, he felt himself lifted from his feet and, carried by two bandits, one of whom held his feet and the other his head and shoulders, he was borne away. He could not shout; he hardly realised what was happening.

But slowly his consciousness returned. He realised his captors were no longer on the plateau. Trees and undergrowth scratched him as he was carried into the jungle.

Into the jungle—a prisoner of these bandits who, he knew, thought nothing of cold-blooded murder!

CHAPTER XII

A FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

PETER did not know how long he was carried through the jungle. He lost count of the hours, and several times he dropped into a semi-conscious stupor. At last he was rudely jerked into consciousness. His carriers simply dropped him, and he thudded to the ground. A groan escaped his lips, but before he could speak a soft, hissing voice came to his ears.

"Be velly quiet! No noise!"

There was something horrible about the sibilant voice, but Peter forgot it in his astonishment at learning his Chinese captor could speak English. He did not have time to think about this, however, for he was roughly handled by two or three men, who tied his hands behind him, but left his feet free.

He did not know for certain, but he believed he was in some kind of hut. The ground beneath his feet was flat, and covered, so far as he could judge, by a loose, powdery dirt. He could not see a thing, and as he stood in the darkness, with the cords cutting into his arms and wrists, he felt hopeless and helpless.

Of all the fates he had thought possible when he had started the great World Flight, this was the last he had anticipated. It seemed

incredible that after the descent and the almost miraculous escape of the two crews, the Herculean labours of getting the *Angel's* petrol tank to the *Pioneer*, that this could have happened.

It was a crowning irony. At the moment of escape, they had been surrounded. Fate seemed to be laughing at them.

Peter knew that even if he was not killed out-of-hand—and it seemed that his fate was not to be that, or he would have been murdered before he had been brought here—he would almost certainly be a captive for weeks, if not months. It was a dreadful prospect, and the fact that he was alone made it worse.

For a while he gave himself up to his hopelessness, and there was small wonder in that. The experiences Peter Grey had had in the last three days would have served most men a lifetime. While he had been with his friends, while his safety had, in effect, been in his own hands, he had faced the dangers with courage. But now he seemed to have nothing to hope for.

As for the World Flight——

A grim little smile curved Peter's lips as he thought of the great race.

By now it was almost certain Ricardo had reached Shanghai. Doubtless he would pitch some cock-and-bull story to the officials there, to explain away the bullet marks on the *Granada*. The damage to the biplane would be repaired —possibly it was already on its way to Yokohama, on the shortest hop that the conditions of the flight demanded.

It was thinking about Ricardo and his treachery that stiffened Peter's resistance to the troubles that now beset him. He began to think, clearly, of the possibility of escape.

Of course, the chances against him were appalling. Even if he got away from his captors, he would be alone in the Chinese jungle, without any instruments to guide him. He might fall a victim to wild beasts, he might catch fever and die in its agonies, he might fall in with another band of marauders.

But anything was better than being here, alone and helpless.

He began to work, slowly, at the ropes round his wrists, and although he had little encouragement, for the knots seemed to have been tied with fiendish thoroughness, he did not stop trying. As he twisted his hands this way and that, behind him, sometimes suffering excruciating shoots of pain, he thought of the others.

One thing was certain. Tim Allen was somewhere near. And, as his uncle and the men from the *Angel* had been warned of the nearness of the bandits, there was a good chance that they had not been captured. Probably they would make some attempt to rescue their less fortunate friends.

He was thinking grimly of the small chance of early rescue when he heard movement near him. It was not the furtive movement of someone trying to get to him without being heard, and after a few seconds he heard the jabber of voices. It was in some tongue that he didn't understand—Chinese, of course—and the voices

were high-pitched, shrilling out question and answer, or so it seemed to Peter.

At last they stopped, quite near him. He heard something "swish," and the next moment a glimmer of light met his eyes.

Now he saw that he was indeed in some kind of hut, but it was absolutely bare of furniture. There was a rough bench that seemed to be built into the wall, and there were two small holes through which the air came, but they were much too small to be of use, if he tried to escape.

But he had only a moment to spare for looking about him. His gaze was concentrated on the men at the entrance, which was a low, oblong hole, cut in the wall and covered by bamboo curtains. The men had to stoop in order to enter the hut, and even when they stood up he saw they were small men. One of them, however, was broad, and looked a man of about fifty—although Peter knew it was difficult to judge the ages of these men.

To his surprise, both of them were dressed in soldier's uniforms. One of them stood by the door all the time, but the older man, carrying a small lantern which shed a dim, yellow glow about the hut, came near him.

Again Peter was surprised, for he spoke a very clear English, which had little foreign accent. It was sing-song, however, and, like most Chinese, the man had trouble with pronouncing his 'r's. He had a round, shiny face, that looked almost like a mask, and he smiled widely, showing yellow, pointed teeth.

"You all light, Mister?" were his first words.

They struck Peter as so comical that he had a hard job to prevent himself from bursting out into a laugh, but he managed to repress it.

"I'm not hurt, if that's what you mean," he said.

The Chinaman came a little nearer, and peered into his face.

"Yes, that iss what I mean," he said. "I no like my guests to be unhappy, no? But" —he lifted his hands, in a gesture of surprise— "you are but a boy, no?"

"I'm young," said Peter.

For some reason he could not understand he did not feel afraid of this man. He did not know the treacherous courtesy of the Chinese, and the speaker seemed friendly enough.

"Yes, yes," said the man. He put the lantern on the floor and rubbed his hands together. "You will like to know how your fliend iss, yes?"

Peter's eyes gleamed excitedly.

"You haven't hurt him?"

"Oh, no," said the Chinaman, with his expansive smile. "He iss as right as you are, Little One. But he iss"—the man shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands in a queer gesture—"so what you call obstinate, yes? He will not talk. Now you—you will tell me what you are?"

Peter's lips tightened.

So this explained the friendliness and the reason for all this courtesy. The man wanted to learn whether his victims were of high

standing in England, and whether they were rich. Well—Tim Allen had refused to talk. Peter could well imagine his friend would be as stubborn as a mule. And if Tim didn't think it was wise to give anything away, Peter told himself he could keep just as silent. He compressed his lips, and stared straight into those almond-shaped eyes—into the eyes of Cho-Ling-Cho.

"We-el?" The Chinaman hissed the word, and now his smile had gone and he was staring at Peter with obvious bad-temper. "You will speak, Little Fool!"

Still Peter said nothing.

With a snarl, the Chinaman lifted his free hand, and struck Peter across the face. The blow stung, and Peter reeled back. Unable to move his arms, he went sprawling, striking his head on the wall of the hut.

The Chinaman's laugh rang out, and he was quivering with mirth as the lad struggled to his feet. It was a difficult job, without being able to use his arms, but Peter succeeded at last. He was no sooner on his feet than the Chinaman struck him again, sending him down.

Winded, he lay still for a few minutes.

He could hear his captor talking in Chinese to the man at the door, and he heard the swish of the bamboo curtain again. He was alone with his tormentor.

Now the man spoke English again.

"Pah! You would defy me, Little Fool? You will suffer a lot for that. Now—one last

chance. Who are you? Are your fiends rich, yes?"

On the floor as he was, Peter maintained a grim silence. The next moment the Chinaman, in a frenzy of rage, kicked the helpless lad time and time again. Peter tried to struggle away, but he could not get up. He was completely at the mercy of this man, who had at first seemed courteous and smiling.

Rage flared up in Peter Grey.

He had never been afraid of fighting, but he had never been in such a predicament as this. But the brutality of the man and his beastliness in attacking him, filled Peter with an anger that was almost fury.

He could just see his attacker, and suddenly he lashed out with his feet. It was all he could do, for the men had tied his arms. He caught the Chinaman's legs, and swept them from under him. With a cry, the man in soldier's uniform tripped up.

Peter knew he would suffer for this, but he cared nothing for it. He had fought back.

Then he stared, in surprise, at his tormentor.

For instead of leaping to his feet, snarling with rage, the Chinaman lay still. For a full minute, that seemed an eternity to Peter as he lay in that dimly-lit hut, the man didn't move.

What had happened?

Peter realised, suddenly, that in falling his captor had cracked his head against the ground, and had been knocked unconscious. It was a chance in a thousand; Peter knew he had been

tremendously lucky to escape a thrashing—or a "beating-up"—as a result of his outburst.

Then he thought, a little grimly, that he would suffer all right, as soon as the man recovered consciousness.

For a moment a mad idea occurred to him. His legs were free, and he could walk. Why shouldn't he take a chance, and get away while the man was unconscious?

He realised the foolhardiness of such an idea, for without weapons—his automatic had been taken from him by his first captor—he was at the mercy of the first thing he met, man or beast. And it was almost certain that this hut was part of a small Chinese village—perhaps a village peopled entirely by brigands. To make the attempt would be madness. Besides, he knew now that Tim Allen was somewhere near, and he would not try to escape unless he could have his friend with him. Peter Grey was not the lad to leave a colleague in the lurch.

He struggled into a sitting position, staring towards the door and wondering what would happen if the other man returned. He had merely made matters worse, he thought gloomily.

Then he turned his eyes from the door, and saw the lamp.

It had been fitted with a glass chimney, but as it had been knocked over in the struggle, the glass was broken, but by a freak of chance, the lamp itself was standing the right way up and the smoky flame was curling towards the ceiling.

Peter stared at it; his eyes widened as the idea came to his head.

The flame would burn the cords at his wrists, if only he could get near to it!

His heart raced as he thought out the possibility. With his arms free, as well as his legs, he stood a chance—and the man on the floor had two knives, which were stuck, dagger fashion, through his belt.

Slowly, carefully, Peter Grey worked himself along the floor to the lamp. Soon it was immediately behind him. He was close enough to start trying.

It was the most difficult part of the venture, and he knew it would cause him a lot of pain. But he had decided to try, and he stuck to his task with a grimness that was worthy of a man twice his age.

He could not see his hands behind him, of course, but he judged his position as well as he could, and pushed his fettered wrists over the flames!

His flesh was burnt, and the pain made him grit his lips to prevent himself from crying out, but he stuck it, moving his hands a little until he judged the flame was actually eating into the bonds. Seconds dragged by like minutes. The pain was almost unbearable, and perspiration gathered on his forehead and on the back of his neck. But not for a moment did he relax. It was the only chance he had!

Then, to his intense relief, his ropes parted! His hands fell apart, and for a second he

was hardly conscious of the pain, so great was his joy. He was free!

But he was not out of the woods yet, by a long way.

His hands were throbbing painfully, and when he looked at them he saw the flesh had been burned terribly. The smell of burning flesh and rope filled the little hut. For a minute, Peter felt sick, but by gritting his teeth he kept himself under control.

The pain eased a little—or perhaps he was getting used to it. Anyhow, he climbed stiffly to his feet and, dashing one hand across his brow, to clear away the sweat, he reached the still unconscious Chinaman and bent over him.

In less than two seconds he had both the man's knives!

He ran his hands over the other's pockets, half hoping to find another weapon—perhaps a gun—but there was nothing there. Well, he told himself, he had already done more than he could have reasonably expected.

A little smile was on his lips as he moved away from the unconscious Chinaman. Then a thought struck him and, taking up the burned ropes, he tied the pieces together until he had a length sufficient to tie the erstwhile captor's hands together.

A chuckle escaped his lips as he trussed the man up. What a shock he would get when he recovered consciousness!

The job was hardly finished when, for a second time, Peter heard the sound of voices.

But he recognised one of them, this time. It was Tim Allen's!

"Don't kick me, you heathen!" Tim snapped out. "I'll break your neck for you when I get these accursed ropes off!"

The Chinaman with Tim raised his voice, in anger. Peter heard a thud, as if his friend had been punched or kicked.

A moment later, the bamboo covering of the door rattled. They were coming in!

Peter crouched close to the wall of the hut, just by the door. He saw Tim Allen first. Tim's usually cheerful face was black with rage, but as his hands were tied behind his back and his feet were hobbled—that is to say a length of rope had been tied round each ankle, so that he could walk, but only take steps of about eighteen inches at a time—he was helpless.

He was pushed into the hut, and the last shove sent him flying. Tim gasped as his head struck the ground.

But Peter had no time to look at him.

Tensely he waited. The Chinaman entered the hut, grinning, obviously expecting to see his Chief. Peter knew he could deal with this one all right—but were there others outside?

He didn't know, and it was one of those things that could be worried about later. For the moment, Peter satisfied himself with handling the man who had been kicking Tim Allen.

Peter drew back his arm, and then drove his clenched fist full into the Chinaman's face!

The man had seen his Chief on the floor,

and he had immediately dropped his hand to his knife. But the surprise attack beat him. He caught the blow on the chin and, with a little grunt he went flying to the floor.

Peter was on him before he could move.

It was no time for niceties. These men would not play by any rules, and Peter could not afford to.

He saw the man's frightened eyes as he knelt on his chest and began to bang his head on the ground. At the third blow, the man half-screamed with pain, and then went still. He was unconscious!

All this time, Tim Allen had been staring in astonishment at the scene. Allen could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes. Not for a moment had he dreamed there was any chance of escape, and now he realised there *was* a chance—and a big one!

Peter drew back from his victim, at last.

"Good work, young 'un," muttered Tim, in a tense voice. "Get my ropes off——"

Peter needed no telling. He jumped across to his friend and slashed the ropes with one of the Chinaman's knives. In less than a minute, Tim Allen was free.

"No time for talking," snapped Tim. "There's no one outside, at the moment—or there wasn't, when I came in. Let's skedaddle!"

"Just a minute." Peter left the other, and bent down once more over his victim. He searched the man's pockets quickly, and he uttered a little shout of joy as he drew an automatic into the dim light!

"My own gun!" he gasped. "This must be the man who searched me!"

With his eyes glistening with excitement, Peter went to the door and carefully raised the bamboo, doing his best to make no sound. Close behind him was Tim Allen, breathing hard. Both of them realised they had only got through the first of their difficulties, but their good luck had filled them with hope.

Outside it was dark, but as far as they could see there was no one near.

"Let's make it," murmured Tim.

Peter grunted an affirmative. Together they stole out of the hut, and found themselves on a rough track, that might have been called a road.

Their eyes were accustomed to the darkness now, and they looked round, to see little yellow glims coming from a dozen different places. Such a glow came from the hut they had just left. They realised quickly that they were in a village, or a camp, and the lights came from the bamboo-covered doorways.

"Shall we turn right or left?" muttered Peter.

"Right," said his companion. "I was taken into a hut further up the road—if you can call it a road—and I had to come in the same direction when that 'gentleman' pushed me into your hut. I only wished," he muttered, "that I could have given him a bit of what you managed, Peter."

Peter grinned, in the darkness. His friend had time, even in the present predicament, to

wish for his revenge on the cowardly Chinamen. Well, that revenge had been meted out, even if it had been second-hand.

They stopped talking. Hardly daring to breathe, they passed one of the huts, but no one saw or heard them. A second was passed —a third.

They dared not slip into the jungle, in the middle of which this camp was built, for they knew they would lose themselves hopelessly, and, lost near the encampment, they might easily wander in circles until they reached it again. Their object was to get as far along the road as possible, and then branch off into the jungle, to wait for morning and the hope that they would be able to see the plateau, or the *Pioneer*.

They reached the last of the huts, and passed it safely. But a little chuckle of satisfaction that escaped Tim Allen's lips had hardly quietened than there came an uproar from behind them.

Their escape had been discovered!

CHAPTER XIII

SAFE!

THERE was only one thing to do. They took to their heels and despite the fatigue of their long day and the pain they suffered, they set a cracking pace.

Neither of them spoke. They realised they must save their breath, for it might come to a fight—and they seemed to decide mutually that they would rather fight to the death than allow themselves to be caught again. On and on they went, heartily thankful for the rough track, along which they could run without the danger of tripping over tree branches or tangled undergrowth.

The din of the pursuit grew louder.

They guessed someone had visited the hut where they had been, and had discovered the unconscious bandits. The alarm had been raised, and they could imagine the men were even now pouring out of the little huts, to join in the pursuit.

They must have run for over a mile, with the shouting still close behind them, but coming more irregularly, now, as though their pursuers were also saving their breath. At last Peter felt that his legs would not carry him a yard further. He stumbled once or twice, and, but

for Tim Allen's helping hand, he would have fallen. He was drinking in the cold night air with great gasps, and his chest seemed on fire. The pain in his wrists grew worse as he swung his arms, and now his legs seemed to be filled with a thousand red-hot needles that stabbed continuously.

At last he stopped.

"I—can't—go—on," he gasped, and sweat was pouring down his face. "You—go—Tim!"

Allen said nothing, but he stopped, and put his arm round the lad. It was still dark, and they could see nothing but the vaguest outlines. They were, however, at least a mile from the village, and Tim decided they could safely go off the track and try their fortune in the jungle. At least the bandits would have less chance of finding them there.

Guiding Peter, Tim Allen broke into the undergrowth.

Luckily it was not thick, here, and they were able to get through fairly easily. They went on, walking now, and slowly Peter recovered his breath. He was still aching in every limb, but he almost forgot it as he realised a vital truth.

There was now no sound of pursuit!

Of course, it was possible the bandits were foxing. They might be able to see better than the Englishmen, and they might know this part of the jungle inside out. But there was an equal chance that they would have run straight along the rough road, taking it for granted that the fugitives had gone along it, too nervous

to take their chance in the Chinese jungle at dead of night.

After half an hour's fast walking, Tim Allen spoke for the first time since they had left the village. He kept his voice low, in case there was anyone near at hand.

"It looks as if our luck's holding," he said. "We'd better take a spell, Peter. If we don't, we'll be all in by the time the morning comes."

Peter nodded. He felt too breathless to speak, and there was just one thing he wanted more than anything else in the world—a sleep. His eyes were heavy and hot, his legs aching, he felt, now he had stopped, that he would never be able to start again. His eyes closed, and he staggered, from sheer exhaustion.

Tim Allen could not see the other's face, but he guessed what was the matter. With a gentle smile, the pilot said:

"This seems a soft path. Let's sit down."

Peter sank to the ground, and stretched himself out. Oh, the rest was good! His relaxed body seemed to be on fire, but it was delightful, compared with the awful agony of the past hour. He breathed fast at first, but slowly his breathing grew more normal. He certainly did not feel capable of thinking. His mind was numb, like his body.

He did not realise he had fallen asleep, but Tim Allen knew. Tim smiled to himself, and squatted beside this brave youngster, with the automatic in his hand.

Tim meant to stay on watch all night, but he was almost as tired as Peter, although he

was more used to long stretches of wakefulness. But this time he dozed.

It was broad daylight when he awakened, with a start, and with the consciousness that he was overwhelmingly hungry. For a few seconds he did not realise where he was. Then he saw Peter's outstretched body, and the tall trees of the forest that stretched towards the sky. Memory flooded back to him.

"By Jove!" he gasped, "we're still free!"

The realization made him jubilant, but he did not let himself take risks. He stood up, stretched himself, and then awakened Peter. The lad took a lot of waking, but at last he was blinking up at the blue sky which could just be seen through the foliage of the tall trees.

"Good heavens!" he gasped at last. "I'd forgotten!"

Tim Allen laughed, grimly.

"I'll bet you won't forget it so easily again, young 'un," he said. "Well, how do you feel this morning?"

Peter gingerly tested his legs, and found that though he was still stiff, he could move them all right. His chest was better, and his arms, although his wrists, where he had burned them, were still sore and angry.

Tim Allen looked at them, and asked:

"How'd you manage that, young 'un? They didn't torture you, did they?"

The expression of anger on the man's face was so comical that Peter burst out laughing.

"Gracious, no!"

He related what had happened, and although his companion said nothing, Tim Allen's opinion of this seventeen-year-old lad went up by leaps and bounds.

"Gee," said Peter, suddenly. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse, Mr. Allen——"

"Make it Tim," said Allen, with a friendly smile. "It's not so cumbersome as 'Mr. Allen'."

Peter's eyes glowed.

"I'd love to," he said, "if you're sure you wouldn't mind."

"Mind? I'd like it," grinned Tim. "Now, young 'un—a meal. I'm certainly hungry, although I don't know whether I could manage a horse. But a nice dish of eggs and bacon, now——"

"Don't!" cried Peter, in mock horror. "It makes me feel worse! If only we could get a cup of tea."

"What a hope!" exclaimed Tim.

They quickly grew more serious, however, and began to discuss what they had best do. They had no idea where they were, and for all they knew they might be within a mile, or even less, of the bandit-village.

"If we could get up one of the trees," said Peter, glancing upwards, "we'd have a better idea. We could see all round."

Tim Allen looked up, thoughtfully, but he was soon frowning. There seemed no chance at all of climbing the trees, which were thick at the bottom, and absolutely smooth until the first branch was reached, perhaps ten feet from the ground.

"Maybe we'll find an easier one if we walk on a bit," said Peter. "There's bound to be one."

It was obviously the only thing to do, so they started their morning's walk, without having the slightest idea where the end of the day would find them. From Tim's watch—which had been overlooked by the bandits, and was still strapped to his wrist—it was half past seven.

"In other words," said Peter, "twelve hours, about, since we were caught, and twenty hours since we came down. I fancy Ricardo and Haufman will be halfway across the Pacific by now."

Tim's face darkened as he thought of the Spaniard whose dastardly effort to send them to a terrible death had resulted in their trouble. If ever they got back to civilization, Ricardo would rue the day he first thought of his murderous schemes.

The morning was so fine, however, and they felt such a glorious sense of freedom, that they did not brood for long.

They must have been walking for ten minutes, looking upwards all the time in order to try and find a tree which they could climb, when Tim cried out:

"There's one!"

They stopped, and stared upwards. The lowest branch of the tree was no less than eight feet from the ground, but after a great effort, Peter managed to climb on to his friend's shoulders, stand up, and clasp the tree branch.

For a moment he swung in mid-air, suspended only by his hands—and the pain in his wrists was torture.

But he held on.

Clenching his teeth, he went hand over hand along the branch, which was luckily strong if small, and he was able to get his fingers round it well. At last he reached the trunk of the tree itself, and then it was easy work.

Like a young monkey he clambered up, forgetting the pain in his wrists now, thinking only of his excitement. He must have been twenty-five feet from the ground when at last he stopped and looked round.

He had a marvellous view of the jungle, and he realised how fortunate they had been. Less than a mile away the tall trees disappeared. More stunted growth replaced it, and above them was a thick mist that spoke of swamps. To the left, and in front of him, the jungle stretched, further than he could see.

Changing his position, he looked behind him.

For a moment he stared, hardly able to believe his eyes. Then he let out a great shout.

"Tim! *The Pioneer!*"

For the great monoplane was standing on the plateau, less than a mile away!

CHAPTER XIV

RE-UNION

PETER stayed up the tree long enough to make sure he had the position of the monoplane in his mind's eye, and then he clambered down. The descent was much easier than the upward journey, and in a few minutes he was standing by the side of his friend.

Tim Allen's eyes were blazing with excitement.

"We've found 'em!" he exclaimed. "Cripes, but they'll get a shock when they see us, Peter!"

Peter laughed, and then a darkling thought entered his head.

"I hope they haven't started a search party, to look for us," he said. "They're likely to, aren't they?"

Tim nodded, but did not stop smiling.

"They'll have tried," he said, "but they certainly wouldn't have gone out at night, so they can't be more than about an hour's journey away. We'll fetch 'em back with a couple of shots, young 'un."

Thus reassured, Peter started to walk cheerfully towards the plateau. He was humming to himself. All the dangers of the previous day seemed to have been forgotten.

It was Tim who stopped, dead still, and muttered a single:

"Quiet!"

Peter stopped humming, and stared in the direction of his companion's gaze. He saw what Tim saw, and took a deep breath.

Less than a hundred yards away, two men were standing against a tree. Their backs were towards the aviators, or they would have been seen immediately.

Quickly, Peter and Tim backed into the shelter of some bushes. Whatever happened they must not be seen. Those men were bandits, and both of them were armed with the old-fashioned shotguns—which could, however, inflict terrible wounds.

It was obvious that the bandits were still surrounding the plateau. Probably they had been there all night, keeping guard, and making sure the other four men did not escape, or try and search for the "prisoners."

"One thing," muttered Tim, "that means your uncle and the others haven't had a chance to get away. Now, softly, Peter. I've got the gun, and if we have any trouble I'll use it."

Peter nodded. Now they began to creep slowly through the undergrowth, making as little noise as they could. But it seemed to them that every time they trod on a twig it cracked with a noise that was like an explosion. Every moment they were expecting a shout to show they had been seen.

They were not greatly afraid of the two men they had noticed, but they guessed there would

be others nearby. Now they were so close to their objective, they did not want to run the risk of getting seriously hurt.

Their progress was tantalizingly slow, but at last they reached the edge of the forest. Less than twenty yards ahead of them was the edge of the plateau. Now they could see the monoplane clearly, and they saw something else.

The spare petrol tank had been rigged up, together with the hastily-constructed trolley on which they had carried the petrol to the *Pioneer*, to make a kind of barricade. Although they could see none of their friends, they guessed all four of them were behind the barrier, safe from the comparatively innocuous fire from the blunderbusses.

They were now approaching the most dangerous moment.

Once they broke through the cover of the jungle forest they would be in full view of the waiting bandits, as well as their own friends. It would be the signal for shooting to start, and they would have to run a gauntlet of bullets and small-shot.

But it had to be chanced.

Tim tightened his hand on the youngster's arm.

"Duck low as soon as you reach the plateau," he said, "and run as fast as your legs can carry you. Don't wait for me—don't look for me. I'll be there as soon as you are."

Peter nodded, realising that if they kept close together it would increase the chances

of a wound, for the bandits would be able to concentrate on the same place. He smiled a little grimly as Tim Allen moved away.

Then, when they were about fifty feet apart, they started to run.

At first the grass deadened the sound of their footsteps, but as soon as they leapt on to that strange table of raised land, the hard ground echoed beneath their feet. It seemed as if horses were galloping across it.

The first footstep was a signal for a sudden shout of alarm from behind them! Almost on the instant a gun roared out, there was a blinding flash, and bucket-shot sprinkled about the ground at Peter's feet.

None touched him, however, and keeping low he raced towards the monoplane.

After a few seconds, other shots came. And then something happened that filled Peter Grey's heart with a tremendous pride. For out of the silence broken at intervals by the gun-shots, and the thudding of his feet, and Tim's, there came a tremendous cry.

It was a single word, and it seemed to rise into the heavens, and reach to the very tops of the trees.

"*Hurrah!*" it came.

The sound of the four English voices raised to such a pitch of enthusiasm, made Peter realise the wonder of being English. It was perhaps a strange thought to flash through his mind as he ran with bucket-shot kicking up little spurts of dust all around him, but it was there nevertheless.

The cry came only once. Then Peter saw something else.

Little stabs of yellow flame were coming from the *Pioneer*. James Lacre and the others were firing, to try and stop the bandits from shooting!

Once, a yell from behind them told them a bullet had taken effect. Immediately after it there was a brief lull in the din. By that time Peter was a few yards from the *Pioneer* and out of the corners of his eyes he saw Tim Allen was only a little further away.

Now he could see the faces of his uncle, Clive, and the other pilots. All four were beaming, obviously relieved beyond words at this return of the men they had thought to be miles away. The barricade was moved, quickly. Willing hands pulled Peter to safety, others dragged Tim into the little enclosure. Then the tree branches were replaced, and they were safe!

. . . . .

Six men, excited as Englishmen rarely are, talked for the next half hour in delighted bursts. Peter and Tim had been given up for lost, but the little band round the *Pioneer* had decided to try and make at least one big effort to trace them.

They had not been able to get away from the plateau, for as Peter had suspected, the raised land was completely surrounded by bandits. They had, however, planned to make a sortie during the morning, and they had

actually started to prepare for it. Apparently they had heard Peter's cries on the previous night, and had rushed to the rescue, only to be driven back in the darkness, and to be hopelessly fogged because they were unable to see.

James Lacre was especially glad to see his nephew back.

"It looks to me, Peter," he said cheerfully, "as if you're the lucky mascot of this outfit. Nothing goes wrong while you're about."

Pendall, the long, rather quiet pilot of the ill-fated *Angel*, chuckled suddenly.

"Nothing goes wrong, eh? I wouldn't like to be with you when things *were* going wrong, Mr. Lacre."

There was a general outburst of laughter. Then things settled down again, and after Peter had given a full account of his adventures, backed up by Tim's, they began to discuss the vital question—what were they going to do?

Meanwhile, Peter's wrists had been treated with first-aid material. They were bandaged, and they no longer felt painful. He realised that if they did manage to get away with no more damage than this, they would be extremely fortunate.

It was, of course, impossible for the *Pioneer's* crew to take off, leaving Clive and his men, although Clive suggested it.

"You've still got an outside chance of getting in somewhere with the race," he said. "We'll be able to look after ourselves, and a relief 'plane ought to be here in twenty-four hours."

"In the meantime," said James Lacre warmly,

"you'll be rushed by the gentlemen on the doorstep, and carried off. I don't think much of the idea, Clive—but it's darned good of you to suggest it."

This settled in no uncertain fashion, there was nothing to do but take their choice of two things—or so it seemed.

First, one of them could take the *Pioneer*—for there was ample room for a run before the take-off, and the bullets of the bandits' rifles would not harm the monoplane—and fetch help from Shanghai, or whatever proved to be the nearest airport, while the other five remained behind. Five against the Chinese marauders stood a chance; three did not.

Secondly, it was on the boards to wait until the bandits grew tired of waiting.

It did not take them long to decide against this latter proposal. It was Clive who said:

"They wouldn't have surrounded us like this, unless they were pretty sure we'd give in at last. Remember our food supplies are limited. Theirs aren't."

"I certainly don't think much of our chances if we wait for them to get tired," said Tim Allen. "I rather fancy they've gone to try and get more men. That's only a few of the main band."

"There's a chance of that," admitted James Lacre. "Well—then one of us will have to take the old *Pioneer* on. We'd better draw lots for it."

There was a general murmur of approval, but for some reason Peter didn't join in. When

his uncle looked at him, expecting to receive an affirmative reply, Peter shook his head.

"There's one other way of getting out," he said.

The others laughed, but there was nothing offensive in it. They realised Peter had an ability to see through the difficulties clearly. If he had been ten years older, he would have been the acknowledged leader of these men. As it was, they did not lightly pass over his opinion.

"I suppose," said Pendall, with a comical grimace, "you've got another idea for keeping the *Pioneer* in the race, young 'un."

Peter laughed a little.

"As a matter of fact, I have," he said.

"Good Lord!" gasped his uncle. "If he doesn't finish this flight I can imagine he'll mope for the rest of his life. Out with it, Peter."

"Well," said Peter, colouring a little as they all watched him, "I don't see why we can't *all* go up in the *Pioneer*."

Immediately there was an outburst of protest. Clive pointed out that their combined weight would be too heavy, and Tim Allen said the cabin would not hold them. Three were a tight fit; six would be a hopeless squeeze. The pilot wouldn't be able to get at his controls.

But Peter stuck to his guns.

"First you've got to remember," he said, "that we can get along on one set of controls, so two men could squeeze in the second control-seat. Two could manage on the spare, and by

wrenching off all the boxes, the sixth could squeeze in. It's not more than four hundred miles, I imagine, and we could do it in little over two hours. It's worth trying, isn't it?"

There was a short silence, broken by James Lacre's:

"Jove, but the young 'un's right! Your objection about weight doesn't count, Clive, old man, because we've only got a half load of petrol—rather less. With a full load we're heavier than we'll be carrying the six of us."

As soon as Lacre's approval came, the others grew enthusiastic over the scheme. None of them were anxious to spend another night in that darkness, at the mercy of a surprise attack. So, after slapping Peter's back heartily, they set to work with a will. The fittings of the *Pioneer's* cabin were wrenched off, and the boxes thrown out. The petrol tank was comfortably full now, and they were all set for the take-off. It was only necessary to clear the barricade away before they started.

Without the barricade they were, of course, at the mercy of the bandits, but the buckshot would not do them any serious harm, at the distance, and as soon as everything else was ready they started to pull the barricade down.

This was the signal for another outburst of firing from the hidden bandits, but little harm was done, although three of them had little lead pellets buried in the calves of their legs before they had climbed up into the cab.

It was a terrible squeeze, yet not so bad as might have been expected. Certainly everyone

was smiling as Pendall, the tall man, swung the propeller.

The engine caught first time. Pendall hurried to the cabin and was hauled in. He was sitting partly on the others' chests and partly on their heads. But they were in!

"And we're off!" shouted Tim Allen, as the *Pioneer* moved slowly forward.

It rose, smoothly and swiftly. Below them, the men could see the bandits swarming over the plateau, sending useless shots into the sky, shaking their fists.

The great 'plane went up and up. Its engines were working smoothly, and apart from the broken radio and the holed windows, there was nothing wrong. They did not know exactly where they were, but their instruments told them the easterly direction they knew was right, and at the end of two hours' flying they saw the sea!

"We're there," chuckled Tim Allen. "Oh, boy! Aren't I glad we brought the mascot along!"

There was a chorus of laughter, but it died away into a tense, silent excitement as they saw ahead of them the spreading city of Shanghai, and the great air-field waiting for them. Slowly the *Pioneer* descended, and it landed perfectly, with one of the most unexpected crews in the history of aviation—and certainly after the most perilous flight.

CHAPTER XV

THE THIRD HOP

THERE was a great deal of excitement when the six men descended from the monoplane, and when the damage done by bullets was seen by the crowd and the gathering of celebrities who had come to the flying field.

Peter had realised the World Flight was the greatest attempt to travel round the world that had ever been made, but at the start, even after the tremendous send-off from Lympne, he had not expected the tremendous excitement, the breathless attention, that the flight caused. It seemed that all the important Europeans in Shanghai, from business houses and Embassies, were at the aerodrome. Apparently they visited it from time to time during the day, and when there was a rumour that a 'plane had been sighted, everyone made tracks for the field. Besides the Europeans, there were many influential Chinamen to greet them, and as Peter saw these men, dressed in European clothes and speaking excellent English, he could not help contrasting them with the bandits—and memory of his ordeal in the hut and the jungle made him shiver.

It was usual for the chief pilot—James Lacre, in the *Pioneer*, to be greeted by the spokesmen

of the Flight officials and then make the introductions. Usually one of the others remained behind to give instructions to the band of mechanics who were ready to do all the repair work necessary.

At Shanghai, however, Lacre did not immediately go into the offices. The aerodrome's Chief Engineer was waiting, and he and Lacre went into a technical discussion, accompanied by Tim Allen and Peter.

All four of them went to the monoplane, pointed out the smashed radio, the broken windows, and the fixings that had been wrenched out to make room for Clive and his men.

The Engineer, an Englishman, gasped in surprise when he saw the state of the cabin, but after a few short questions, he realised that James Lacre wanted to keep silent about the affair. He proved helpful and willing to keep back his curiosity.

"Of course," said Lacre, "we can't start again until we're shipshape. How long will it take you to rig everything up, Mr. Blake, and tune the engines?"

Blake, the Engineer, shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't make a promise," he said, "but I'll have every available man on the *Pioneer*, Mr. Lacre, and they'll work until you're airworthy again. It might take ten hours—it might take twenty."

"Thanks very much," said James Lacre. "You've got all the necessary spares, have you?"

"I've enough to make do," said Blake.

"Spare no expense at all," said James Lacre.

Blake promised he would do everything within his power, and to prove it he got into a set of overalls himself, and started to superintend his men. Over twenty mechanics, most of them little, white-clad Chinamen, swarmed round the *Pioneer*. Again Peter contrasted these men with the bandits, and he realised it was useless to judge the great yellow race from the bad examples he had seen in the jungle.

There were many things to talk about, of course, and the aerodrome officials were hardly able to contain their curiosity about the flight from Kabul. First, however, James Lacre asked:

"How are the others going?"

Peter had been dying for this question. He admired the way his uncle thought, first, of getting the *Pioneer* ready for the next hop, but all the time he was desperately anxious to learn whether Ricardo and any of the others had arrived.

A man named Pearson, a tall, dark-tanned Englishman with a close-cropped military moustache, a pair of keen blue eyes and an upright, soldierly figure, was the World Flight's official controller at the Shanghai aerodrome. He answered Lacre thoughtfully, walking as he did so into his office, and pointing to a great map of the world spread over one wall.

"Haufman arrived first," he said, "over twenty-four hours ago. So far he has had no trouble, and he started off again at the end

of four hours. He reached Yokohama three hours later, and left there after a one hour interval. So Haufman is over the Pacific, at the moment, sixteen hours out."

"That's good going," said Lacre.

With Pearson and several other officials, and all the crews of the *Pioneer* and the *Angel*, they were in the office, examining the great map. The different stages of the flight were marked in red, and all over it little flags were stuck, bearing the names of the various competitors.

One flag was stuck in the middle of the Pacific, being Haufman's estimated position. Also in the Pacific, about three hundred miles —or two hours' flying from Yokohama, was the *Granada*.

"So Ricardo got away all right," said James Lacre.

"Yes," said Pearson, eyeing the air ace contemplatively. "And Ricardo said you were down, in flames—brought down by rifle from bandits."

"I daresay he did," said Lacre quietly. "What did he say about the *Angel*?"

"Exactly the same," said Pearson.

Lacre laughed a little. He did not intend to tell all these officials the truth, however, although he planned to make a statement to Pearson alone. So:

"Well, he was right about us being brought down," he said, "but we didn't fall in flames —as you can see." He looked at the map again, and the little position flags. Pearson

understood he did not want to talk about Ricardo, and touched the third flag on the route.

This was at Yokohama—the *Deutschland*.

"Graffhein's at Yokohama," went on Pearson. "He left here five hours before you arrived, after a five hour rest. He was going to stay overnight in Japan, and start the Honolulu hop at dawn. Young Cartwright, in the *Silver Flier*, left soon after him and they are probably going to tackle the Pacific flight together—not a bad plan."

"Cartwright's doing well," said Lacre.

Peter remembered the little glittering monoplane, and he was amazed to think it had made the flight so well. But his thoughts changed quickly as Pearson went on:

"Then you come," he said. "You're fifth, but before you leave two or three of the others will probably be here. Three have wirelessed they're within five hundred miles, and we should see them almost any time."

"Who are they?" Lacre asked.

Pearson mentioned three 'planes which, however, met with trouble before they left Shanghai, and were to all intents and purposes out of the race. The fliers learned, also, that of the eighteen starters, only ten were left. Two other 'planes had crashed, with the loss of all the crews. Six, including the *Pioneer's* sister-'plane, the *Morning Star*, had developed engine trouble to such an extent that they could not hope to continue. Of the remaining ten, four were in front of Lacre's machine, three were immediately behind, and two were still a long way

behind, one at Bagdad, forced off its route, and the other at Kabul.

"With normal luck," said Pearson finally, "you'll be the fifth away from here, Lacre, and one of eight still in the race. It's not over yet, of course, by a long way. Even Haufman, with practically forty-eight hours' start, is by no means a certain winner, although I think that new 'plane of his is a marvel."

Lacre nodded, in full agreement.

Peter thought excitedly of the fact they were still in the race. A few hours before it had seemed impossible that they could continue, and now he realised that if they kept free of engine trouble, they might easily catch the *Haufman* up. After all, the Austrian machine had been absolutely trouble free, and it was not likely such immunity would last all of the flight.

The thought made him forget the treachery which had put them so far behind, but Lacre's next words reminded him.

"I'd like a word with you privately, Pearson," he said. "That is, I don't want anyone but you, and my fellows—with Clive of course—to hear me."

Pearson nodded—he was an understanding man—and soon the fliers were in his private office.

James Lacre spoke quietly.

"First," he said, "I want to report officially that Ricardo was lying when he talked about rifle fire from bandits. But before I go any further, I'd like to say that I think it unwise to allow the publication of any of this statement before the end of the flight."

Pearson nodded. He looked very grave as he said:

"I quite agree with you, Lacre. More than that—I'm prepared to hear something startling. I don't like Ricardo, and I was convinced he was lying when he said that both you and Clive had been flying low enough to be within reach of rifle-fire."

"So that's how he put it, eh?"

"Yes. He said he flew low, to see if he could be of any assistance, and while I didn't want to be ungenerous, I certainly could not imagine Ricardo doing anything like that. For one thing he's not the man to endanger himself for anyone else. For another he has obviously set his heart on winning this race."

Lacre nodded. Peter thought it was obvious Ricardo's reputation among flying men was a bad one.

"Well," James Lacre said at last. "The truth of the matter is, Pearson, that Ricardo hid behind clouds, waited for the *Angel*, and forced it down with machine-gun fire."

"Great Scott!" Pearson's words burst from his lips, and he looked horrified. "It doesn't sound possible, Lacre!"

"Nonetheless it is," said James Lacre, grimly. "Clive will bear me out. He returned the fire with his automatics, but Ricardo had a tremendous advantage, and Clive was forced down."

"Thinking what I'd like to do with the Spanish swine," said Clive, bitterly.

"The man deserves to hang!" exclaimed Pearson.

"Probably he will," said Lacre. "Anyhow, we went after him, winged him, but he punctured our petrol tank and we had to go down."

Pearson's expression blackened as the whole of the story came out, but he was moved to an exclamation of admiration when he learned of the change of petrol, the fight with the bandits, and the final decision to load the *Pioneer* with all six men.

Suddenly he extended a hand, and grasped Peter Grey's.

"Young man," he said, "I'm proud of you, and so are all airmen. We've already heard of your exploit on the way to Kabul, and we congratulate you, very warmly, on possessing courage and ability."

Peter stammered some kind of reply. He was always nervous when he was praised, and he experienced a desire to see the ground open up and swallow him. Luckily Pearson saw his embarrassment, and with a little smile went on:

"Well, I'll make the official report, gentlemen, and I'll do all in my power to make sure nothing of this murderous attack gets into the newspapers. Meanwhile there is one very serious aspect which, perhaps, you haven't had time to study."

"And that is?" asked James Lacre.

"What this means—or might mean—to Haufman, Graffhein and Cartwright. I think we should warn them to watch for trouble."

The others nodded. Peter had not, in fact, thought of this complication, but it was obvious his uncle had.

"I'm in complete agreement about Graffhein and Cartwright," he said, "but not with Haufman. Chiefly because while Haufman is twelve hours or more ahead of Ricardo, he is in no danger. You will know the position of the 'planes, hour by hour, and as soon as Ricardo begins to overtake Haufman—if he ever does—you can look after the warning. Graffhein and Cartwright, however, are in danger, for they're just behind the Spaniard."

Pearson nodded thoughtfully.

"I think that's wise," he said. "Well, we can telephone to Yokohama, and talk to Cartwright and Graffhein. Perhaps"—he looked at Lacre—"you would prefer to talk to them? It can be an unofficial warning, then."

"That will be best," admitted James Lacre. "Well, I'll have a clean-up and a nap. All of us can do with one," he added with a laugh, and indeed the airmen looked a sorry crew, dirty, tired, their clothes torn badly. "When Graffhein and Cartwright reach Japan, you can call me. Is that all right?"

Pearson nodded. The airmen left the office, only too glad of a rest. Peter was tired, now that the excitement was over. He almost fell asleep as he walked towards the hotel, which was on the edge of the aerodrome, where accommodation had been reserved for them. He was certainly too exhausted to think, and after a quick, warm bath, he tucked in between the sheets.

When he awakened it was dark. He lay still for a while, until he began to feel the gnawing

pains of hunger. Eat and sleep—that was all he felt like doing, this flight.

He was refreshed now, however, and he was certainly not tired. He looked at the small, luminous clock near his bed, and saw it was four o'clock—local time, of course, and not Greenwich time, which they were using throughout the flight.

In a short while his hunger grew to such an extent that he decided to walk along the passage and try and forage for something to satisfy his empty stomach.

He was alone in the room, which was a small one with a communicating door to a larger room which Lacre and Tim Allen shared. Not wishing to disturb them, he tried to get out to the passage through his own door, but he found it was locked on the outside.

There was nothing for it but to go through the larger bedroom. Tiptoeing to the door, he opened it carefully, without making the slightest sound——

And then he stopped dead still, staring in stupefaction at the door leading from the passage to his uncle's room.

The door was opening slowly. He could see no one, but he knew, after a quick glance, that the others were still asleep.

Who was entering, so slowly and furtively?

Was this yet another dastardly attack on the *Pioneer's* crew?

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT ATTACK

THE light in the larger room was burning—a lucky thing for Peter, for without it the silent opening of the door, and the light shining into darkness, must have warned the intruder that someone was awake, and up. As it was, there was no sound in the room but the heavy breathing of the two sleeping men, and the almost silent breathing of Peter and the man who was opening the other door.

A dozen thoughts flashed through Peter's mind.

What was the best thing to do? Should he cry out, and alarm his uncle and Tim Allen? That seemed the most obvious thing, yet Peter was not anxious to put the idea into execution. He knew that his shout would scare the man at the door away—and Peter did not want to do that.

He wanted to save the others from any harm that might befall—but he realised quickly that it might be a tremendous help if they could capture the intruder.

Quickly he decided on his plan and, carefully, he closed his own door, until it was only open a couple of inches. He could see clearly into the other room, but whoever was making

this midnight entry certainly could not see him. With bated breath, Peter waited.

The other door opened gradually. Its movement was so slow that hours seemed to pass before it was wide enough for Peter to see who was there.

Involuntarily, his lips tightened and his eyes narrowed.

There was no doubt now but that this was an attack on the airmen! For framed in the doorway was a Chinaman, a small, wizened little man, whose round face was set in a smiling mask—it seemed to Peter that Chinamen were always smiling—but whose right hand revealed the insincerity of his smile.

Clutched in the hand was a knife!

Its bright steel glinted in the electric light, and the sight made a shiver shake Peter's body. It looked murderous.

Quick as a thought, Peter turned round and grabbed the clock from the table at his bedside. When he had returned to the door he saw the Chinaman was now half-way to the sleeping Allen, whose bed was nearest the passage.

The man's almond eyes were creased so that they were little more than evil slits in his yellow, wizened face. Step by step he went forward, with infinite caution.

As he drew nearer the bed, he lifted the knife a little. There was no doubt of his intention. He was going to plunge it first into Allen's throat, then into James Lacre's. But for the merciful providence of Peter's awakening, and his acute hunger, the dreadful crime must have

been committed. The other two pilots were sleeping heavily, thoroughly exhausted by their arduous adventures.

Peter's heart was beating fast, and his fingers clenched the little clock. He knew he must be accurate in his aim, but he was not worried by the possibility of missing. He had been an expert with a cricket ball, and he knew he would not miss. It was the waiting until he was sure the Chinaman was far enough into the room to be unable to escape that got on Peter's nerves.

At last he decided to throw the clock!

He pulled the door open, silently, poised the clock, and saw at the same moment he had made a dreadful mistake!

For the Chinaman leapt, suddenly, ferociously, at the sleeping men. There seemed no chance at all for Tim Allen.

At the last moment, Peter altered his aim. He had intended to throw at the man's head, but he realised, in a flash, that it would be useless. The knife would have done its terrible work before the clock struck the murderer.

Taking a deep breath, Peter aimed at the knife.

The clock hurtled across the room. For a moment Peter thought it was going wide, but luck was with him. It struck the blade full, and splintered it! The pieces flew over the bed, one of them piercing Tim's cheek. The blood spurted, but Peter did not see it.

He leapt forward at the Chinaman.

The intruder had swung round, as the clock struck home, and his yellow face was distorted

in rage. But he was not prepared for the human catapult that crashed into him. With a snarl he dropped to the ground, and Peter was on top of him.

The men in the beds awakened in alarm. Dazed as they were they could not appreciate the full meaning of the writhing, shouting bundle of humanity on the floor, between the beds. They saw Peter's slim body, clad in borrowed pyjamas, and the Chinamen dressed in European clothes, like men in a dream.

Meanwhile Peter discovered the little man was tremendously strong.

Once the Chinaman jabbed his knee into Peter's stomach, making the lad wince with pain. But he did not relax the grip he had on the other's shoulders. Over and over they rolled, kicking, struggling, and all the time the Chinaman was swearing and muttering. Suddenly his mouth opened and he twisted his head, biting at Peter's wrist!

His sharp, pointed teeth bit into the wounded flesh—the wounds caused by burning on the previous night. Agony went through Peter Grey, and his grip relaxed. He felt the Chinaman push him away, realised the man was up and on his feet, and thought for a moment the man would get away.

Then he heard his uncle's voice, thick with rage.

"No you don't, you little rat!"

Peter's eyes cleared. He was just in time to see James Lacre crash his clenched fist into the Chinaman's face. With a little groan, the

man collapsed, and fell unconscious across Tim Allen's bed.

James Lacre was taking no chances, now.

He realised what must have happened, and the sight of the broken knife, on the floor, told him the murderous intent of this night visitation. He took a pillow from his bed, slipped it out of its cover, and used the latter to bind the unconscious man's arms behind him. While he did so Tim Allen, very wide awake now, helped Peter up, and seeing the nasty wound caused by the bite, led the lad to a bowl fitted in the bedroom, and began to bathe it. The cold water was still running over the bare wound when James Lacre, breathing hard but smiling a little, come over to them.

"What happened, Peter?"

Peter explained, briefly, and finished:

"I thought if we could catch him we might force him to talk. Otherwise I could have frightened him away before."

"You're right enough," said James Lacre, slowly, "although you shouldn't risk yourself so much, young 'un. Even a cat's only got nine lives, you know. Still"—he smiled a little, and patted Peter's shoulder—"you're doing better than ever."

As always, Peter coloured a little, and said something that came into his head. The others realised he would never talk about himself, and, with the wrist bandaged again, they turned to the Chinaman, who was still unconscious.

Tim Allen suggested calling the hotel authorities, but James Lacre was against it. He guessed there was a connection between this attack and Ricardo's ruthless attempts to make sure he won the World Flight. If the hotel people learned of this attack the newspapers would certainly get to hear of it, and information about the adventures in the Chinese jungle might leak out. James Lacre had a big respect for the ability of newspaper reporters to get information from sources that seemed absolutely barren.

The three of them dressed, quickly, and by the time they were ready, the Chinaman was awake. He would not move, and his eyes darted to and fro. Obviously he was in deathly fear of his captors. When they spoke to him, however, he only jabbered in Chinese at a tremendous rate, and they could not understand him even when he interpolated a word or two of broken English.

"He either can't speak decent English, or he won't," said Jim Lacre. "We'll get him along to the aerodrome, and then send for Pearson. He'll know more about the language than we do."

It was a sound plan, and they put it into execution immediately. There was a sleepy Chinese night-porter on duty at the foyer, but he said nothing as the three Englishmen and their prisoner went out. Chinamen are the most silent and incurious people in the world. Unless a thing happens that directly affects them, they take no notice of it at all.

James Lacre knew the way to the aerodrome, and it took them a little more than twenty minutes to reach it. The place was well guarded, in case there was trouble with the *Pioneer*—not so much trouble from Ricardo or his associates, but from souvenir hunters who, anxious to get something from the world-famous *Pioneer*, would have pulled the 'plane to pieces if they had been allowed to get near it.

The guards recognised the fliers, stared curiously at their prisoner, but let them all pass, without question. They reached the office building, noting with pleasure and satisfaction that men were still buzzing round the monoplane, working in the light of petrol flares and lamps that had been specially made-up to reach the machine.

One of the first people they met in the offices was Pearson himself.

It was nearly five o'clock, and Pearson said he had expected other arrivals then, and had wanted to be ready for them. No-one had turned up, however, and Pearson was getting anxious about the three 'planes that had wirelessed on the previous night, that they were within a few hundred miles of Shanghai.

He forgot about them, however, as he heard what had happened. Grim-faced, he spoke to the Chinaman in his native language, but the man remained obstinate.

"I've an idea I know him," Pearson said to James Lacre. "I think the best thing to do is to leave him to me. I'll tell the police that

we believe the attempt to murder you was connected with the flight, and they'll get the truth out of the little rat."

"Can you rely on the police keeping silent?" asked Lacre.

"No Chinaman ever talks unless he wants to," said Pearson, with a smile. "You needn't worry about this, Lacre. Leave it to me entirely."

A few minutes afterwards two aerodrome guards took the Chinaman off, to the nearest police-station. Pearson had a word on the telephone with the Night Superintendent, and assured Lacre again that the investigations would be carried out with the strictest secrecy.

Then he said:

"I spoke to Graffhein over the telephone, Lacre, and he tells me he plans to leave Yokohama at six. Cartwright's leaving at the same time. He promised to telephone me if by any chance they changed their minds."

James Lacre nodded, and looked at his watch.

"He should be awake, now," he said. "I think I'll speak to him, if I may."

Pearson said "yes," and put the call through. There was a cable under the sea from Shanghai to Yokohama, and the call was cleared in less than five minutes. Graffhein was at the Japanese aerodrome, and he listened without comment to Lacre's words.

"Be careful of Ricardo," James Lacre said. "He's carrying a machine-gun, and he'll take any risks to get in first. And remember if he makes any attempt to 'get at' you, he'll drive

to kill you. It will be no use to him if you're alive and can afterwards tell the truth."

Graffhein said that he understood. He was obvious deeply grateful for the warning, and he promised to pass it on the Cartwright immediately. The two airmen wished each other luck. Then Lacre replaced the receiver, and said:

"We'll have a look at the *Pioneer* before we go back to breakfast, I think."

"I'm having breakfast prepared here," said Pearson quickly. "Blake's still over on your bus."

The three airmen hurried across the field. They saw Blake who had worked without a wink of sleep all night, and despite his weariness he was smiling cheerfully.

"We'll have her ready in a couple of hours," he promised.

"I'll never be able to thank you enough," said James Lacre sincerely, and the others echoed his words. Blake laughed a little, and said:

"Between you and me, I thought Ricardo's tale was a funny one, and I've more than an idea what's happened. So I'm particularly anxious to give you a good send-off."

Their hearts warmed to the man, who shooed them away to get breakfast, and make preparation for the flight, which they reckoned would start again soon after seven o'clock.

After a good breakfast and a shower, they had news from Pearson about the murderous Chinaman.

"He's a well-known cut-throat," he said, "and he was bribed to do to-night's job by a gang-chief. He doesn't know who's behind it, but the police will get to know during the day."

"It's Ricardo, of course," said James Lacre. "Well—thanks a lot for all you've done, Pearson."

"Oh, that's nothing," said the official. "I'd do it again anytime for you—and for a youngster like your nephew. Well—what's Blake's news?"

They told him, and he nodded thoughtfully.

"I've had word," he said, "that the two 'planes I expected last night were forced to land at Hankow. One's badly damaged, and the other's got engine trouble. The third bus had to turn back to Kabul."

James Lacre whistled.

"So there's really only five in it, now?"

"That's right. Haufman—no news of him from Honolulu yet—Ricardo, Graffhein, Cartwright and you. I had a message ten minutes ago that the latter two got off at six o'clock sharp. You'll be at Yokohama by ten, and you needn't stop longer than half an hour, to re-fuel. So they've only got a four-and-a-half hour lead of you."

"Only?" laughed James Lacre.

But he realised there was little or nothing in it. As a matter of fact, the *Pioneer* had done better than any of the other 'planes, for it had been faced with engine trouble once, and then had been forced to lose twenty-four hours after the fight with Ricardo. Its average

speed was greater than any of the others left in the flight, and there was a good chance for a close race at the end.

It was obvious that their first suspicions were justified. Ricardo was the man who, it appeared, had started the trouble at Heston. The *Haufman's* flight had been a marvel. It was now well on the way to Honolulu, and it would complete that journey, making its total flying miles of over fifteen thousand in a little more than four days, including stops. It was a performance bordering on the miraculous.

For that matter, Ricardo's *Granada* had done wonders. The machine itself could not be blamed for the perfidy of its owner and pilot and, allowing for the fact that it had lost a lot of time waiting over China for the two monoplanes, it had flown at least twelve thousand miles.

Nor were the other three 'planes far behind. Perhaps the most astonishing performance, so far, was that of the remarkable little *Silver Flier*, with its two pilots.

But on a flight of this nature, it was almost certain that some kind of trouble would develop. Engines were as near perfect as possible, but the millions of revolutions, the tremendous strain of being worked to the uttermost for so long, and with such little rest, must tell on them. The propellers, too, usually felt the strain, and parts of the fuselage. The *Pioneer*, however, could look forward to a good spell, now, without trouble, while by the law of averages the others still had theirs to come.

It was, when all was said and done, a marvellous race, and a remarkable test of human endurance. But for the murderous Ricardo, it would have gone without a hitch. But he had to be reckoned with.

Peter thought very little about him, however, in the excitement of re-starting the flight.

Blake and his men had done wonders with the *Pioneer*. Its windows were whole again, the fittings were replaced, and the radio had been rigged up. Everything was in tip-top order, and Blake reported that there had been very little the matter with the engines. Apart from oiling and greasing, they had wanted next to nothing done.

Just before seven o'clock, Peter climbed into the cabin. Tim followed him, and his uncle made up the last. Beneath them, despite the early hour, a good crowd had assembled to see them off. Some of the *Pioneer's* difficulties had been broadcast, and there was a tremendous shout of encouragement as the great machine lifted off the ground again.

Peter's eyes glistened.

Below, he could just distinguish Clive and his men, who had been there to wish them Godspeed. Ahead of him stretched the waters of the sea.

Yokohama next. Then the Pacific. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE SILVER FLIER'S MISFORTUNE

ALTHOUGH they had flown close to the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean, they had now started on their first flight of any distance while out of sight of land. There was something about the silver stretch of the water, opening out beneath them, that gave Peter the biggest thrill he had had since he started.

Between Shanghai and the first of the islands of Japan, however, the sea was crossed by many shipping roads, and at no time were they out of sight of some steamer or other. Big liners looked tiny, down below, and smaller boats looked no more than little black specks.

They were travelling more north than in the rest of their journey, because the route mapped out by the organisers of the flight had specified it. Yokohama was the nearest large town to Honolulu—apart, of course, from towns on some of the islands, but it was not possible to be sure of reaching any definite point in the East or West Indies. And although the hop from Shanghai was a small one, it was a wise condition to make the 'planes land in Japan.

Everyone acknowledged that the Pacific flight was the most hazardous part of the journey. For thousands of miles they would

fly "blind"—out of reach of land, without a chance of assistance if trouble came. Moreover, if they were forced down they would not be able to take a chance, as they had been able to do in the jungle. Their fate, almost for certain, would be death by drowning. The waters of the ocean are the most merciless things in the world.

It was with a full realization of this that the fliers had started the trip and, in fact, after the troubles of their earlier flight, they did not feel that anything could be worse. Moreover, Ricardo was a good way off—he was thirty hours or more ahead of them—and there would be no danger from him.

They thought of these things as they flew across the sea, until Peter's attention was distracted by the sight of land.

Yokohama was on the Japanese mainland, and on the other side. They had reached little more than half way when they started to fly over land once more, and the journey had taken nearly two hours. Now there was a suggestion of monotony. They were making a hop that was little more than an everyday flight, and with the remarkable trick of the human mind, they began to look forward to the longer hop, and the risks it involved.

They did not expect any trouble before they reached the Japanese port, and they were justified in their optimism.

The *Pioneer's* engines did not hesitate, and at last they glided down, again towards a field ringed with masses of people.

It was nearly midday, and it seemed that Yokohama had decided to make it a public holiday. Tens of thousands of the little men and women, picturesquely dressed, crowded the field, and were only kept back by the efforts of the police and military.

There was a tumultuous welcome for them, and Peter's heart warmed to the thought that these men and women, although they were thousands of miles away from England, although the only Japanese machine had turned back early in the race, could reach such pitches of enthusiasm. It was an inspiring moment as they stepped out of the cabin, and set foot on Japanese ground.

A dozen Japanese noblemen and officials joined with the Europeans who greeted them.

An old man, with a white beard, a pair of twinkling blue eyes and a deep, remarkably youthful voice, proved to be Norman, the World Flight's official representative. He greeted them warmly, and ushered them across to the offices, where warm drinks and sandwiches were prepared.

"How long are you stopping here?" he asked James Lacre.

"Just long enough to get the tanks re-filled, and the engines oiled," said the air-ace.

Norman nodded. A few minutes later Peter Grey was forced again to listen to congratulatory words, back-pattings, photographs and the usual penalties of fame.

For Peter Grey had won fame, in that trip.

His youth and his daring exploits had fired the imagination of the world. In Yokohama a more-or-less true account of the trouble with Chinese

bandits had been circulated in the newspapers and photographs, that had been wirelessed halfway across the world, were in all the papers.

Luckily for Peter, some of the glory of the exploits was reflected on the older men, and they rescued him from unwelcome attention whenever they could. In truth they had very little time to spare at the aerodrome. It had been half past ten when they had arrived, and they wanted to be in the air again at eleven.

They were walking across the field, surrounded by men and women who were laughing and chattering gaily, when Peter looked up into the heavens and, a long way out to sea, fancied he saw a speck in the air.

He stared for several minutes, and the speck grew larger.

"See that up there?" he asked his uncle, quietly.

James Lacre looked up, and his eyes widened.

"A 'plane," he said. "I wonder who's been out."

At first he thought it was a Japanese private 'plane, but when he mentioned it to Norman, the old man shook his head.

"We've nothing due here at all," he said.

In a few minutes all eyes—those of the people in the crowd as well as those near the *Pioneer*—were turned towards the sky.

It was a perfect day, and the sun was well up, almost directly above their heads. Only an occasional fleecy cloud wafted across that stretch of azure blue, and a light wind rustled about their ears. For some reason Peter could hardly understand, there was a silence, broken

only by a low murmur, as if those people who were talking had lowered their voices.

The speck grew larger, until it was obvious it was an aeroplane—and less obvious that it was black. The sun gleamed on it, reflecting a golden yellow.

"Great Scott!" Peter gasped out suddenly. "It looks like the *Silver Flier!*"

"That's what I've been thinking," said his uncle. "It's a bright 'bus all right."

As they spoke the aeroplane grew nearer. Now there was no doubt at all that it was Cartwright's 'plane. As it approached, and began to descend, James Lacre said in a low voice:

"Notice anything queer, Peter?"

Peter frowned, but several seconds passed and the machine was a few hundred yards away before he realised what his uncle meant. Then he exclaimed:

"It's silent!"

There was a gasp of astonishment from the people nearby. He had not been alone in missing that significant fact. The engines of the aeroplane were not running. It was *gliding* downwards!

But gliding or not, its pilot made a perfect landing.

It rolled gently along the ground, and stopped within twenty yards of the *Pioneer*. By now a dozen men were running towards it. Peter and his uncle were in the van.

They saw a cheerful-faced youngster climb out—he could not be more than twenty-one or two—Peter thought. He was smiling a little

ruefully, the wind ruffled his light, curly hair, as it also stirred the plastered, black hair of the man who climbed out after him. This second man was probably three years older than the fair-headed pilot, but he looked pleasant, cheerful, and unassuming.

"That's Cartwright," said James Lacre. "The dark one's Smith, his friend."

A moment later Cartwright caught sight of James Lacre, and hurried to him, with hand outstretched.

"Hallo, Lacre! Darned glad to see you safe!"

"I'm glad to see you," said James Lacre. "What happened?"

"Engines went back on us," said Cartwright with a little laugh. "We thought we were properly pipped, eh, Smithy."

"We were all set for a watery grave," grinned Smith, as if he was talking about a swimming lesson. "Still, one of the mules decided to kick at last, so we turned back and did our best to flog it."

"Mules?" smiled Lacre.

"Or an obstinate engine," said the cheerful Cartwright. "Lordy, but I was glad to see dry land again."

"Had to glide the last ten miles," said Smith, still smiling. Perhaps it was their relief at having escaped from what had seemed to be certain death that cheered them. "Carts did the trick all right."

There were murmurs of congratulation at their escape, although the two pilots smilingly denied any suggestion that they had handled

the *Silver Flier* brilliantly. Actually, everyone there with flying experience realised it was an almost unparalleled feat to have forced a heavy machine like theirs to glide for ten miles.

"One thing's certain," said Cartwright, "we're pipped all right. I thought it was too good to last."

"No one much behind you," said Lacre.

"That's good hearing," said Cartwright frankly. "I reckon it'll be twenty-four hours before we can go up again. By the way," he digressed, "you've had a pretty tough passage. Where's that young lion of yours."

Peter did not feel embarrassed by these cheerful youngsters who were not a great deal older than himself. They shook hands together, chattered for a few minutes, and then James Lacre said:

"Well, we're off. Good luck, Cartwright."

Amid a chorus of good-byes, the crew of the *Pioneer* climbed into their cabin. The propeller whirled, the engine kicked, the wheels ran smoothly along the ground and then the great monoplane rose like a huge bird.

A roar went up to the heavens as they ascended, and again Peter Grey realised the remarkable international friendship this race had inspired. It was an exalting thought, but it was disturbed by memory of Ricardo. That a man could blacken such a noteworthy race as this for nothing more than personal gain, made him feel sick.

But it couldn't be helped—and they were up again.

CHAPTER XVIII

HONOLULU NON-STOP

THE ocean flight to Honolulu from Yokohama meant a non-stop run of three thousand four hundred miles, with only a few scattered islands, none of which carried spares, in between. To fail on this part of the race meant complete failure.

Honolulu itself had been fixed as a base by the World Race officials, special men had been sent to its airfield, and everything that might be necessary would be there, as well as an ample supply of petrol. At Yokohama, the *Pioneer* had taken enough fuel to last for five thousand miles, so there was little risk of running short. They knew, of course, that winds and storms would probably force them a long way out of their path, but it would be very bad luck indeed if they had to fly more than four thousand five hundred miles.

The *Pioneer* started well, and as the weather was clear, visibility good and the wind slight, James Lacre decided to let her full out. For three hours they travelled at over two hundred miles an hour, and not once had there been the slightest suggestion of trouble. The start was excellent.

The sea stretched like a blue, endless lake before them and all around them. No ships

were in sight. In fact they had not seen anything at all for over an hour. They were well out to sea, and there was every likelihood that they would sight nothing at all for the next twelve or fourteen hours.

If they averaged a hundred and fifty on the whole flight, and met with no disaster, they estimated they would be at the Pacific island in about twenty-five hours—allowing for four hundred miles deviation from the straight run. That would get them there at midday—Greenwich time—on the following day, the sixth day of the great race.

As far as they knew, they were nearly two days behind the *Haufman*, a day behind Ricardo, and a few hours behind Graffhein.

The race was in an exciting position. They were fourth on the list, now, and stood a good chance of reaching Honolulu before the *Deutschland*, which could not travel much more than a hundred and ninety. They were, in fact, practically level for the third place.

Two days, of course, would take a lot of picking up. On the other hand it was practically certain the *Haufman's* engines would have to be thoroughly overhauled before the flight was over, which meant at least a twelve hour delay. The Austrian would not risk the last great hop—the Atlantic flight—without making sure his engines were well up to their job.

As for Ricardo——

None of the three men thought a great deal about him. When they did, they felt an overwhelming anger, and they thought it best to

try and forget him, at least until the race was over.

But Peter, during one of his spells at the controls, could not get the thing out of his mind.

He was finding, now, that one of the biggest enemies of long-distance fliers is monotony. Hour after hour of exactly the same thing—unruffled blue seas, the distant horizon, the sun which hardly seemed to alter its position hour to hour, all wore at the nerves. But they were well-rested, and cheerful. They stood the monotony well, and Peter, realising it would not last for more than thirty hours, during which he would have two spells of sleep, was not unduly worried.

So for once he concentrated on thinking about the rascally Spaniard.

It was obvious that the *Granada* was a wonderful 'plane. Its flight had been trouble-free—apart from the trouble that Ricardo had brought on himself—and if he had devoted his attentions to the flight alone, he might easily have been almost directly behind Haufman; he might even have been ahead.

In fact, it seemed to have been madness on the part of the Spaniard. He had practically thrown away his chance of getting the lead, to stop the other machines. And he must have realised that by wasting time—as he had wasted it while he had been above the clouds over China—he was lessening his chances of overtaking the *Haufman*. What had possessed him to do that?

Another thing that puzzled Peter was the fact that the attacks had been so well-organized. Nearly a week before the flight, the attempt had been made to kill Tim Allen. Then the effort to wreck the *Pioneer* had been made, three days before the start from Lympne.

Those things alone were understandable, up to a point. So was the affair of the fight in the air. But when it came to trying to understand the affair in Shanghai, Peter had to admit himself beaten. He simply could not think how Ricardo, who had only stopped a few hours at the landing-field, and on the evidence of many of the officials had not been further than the club offices, had managed to arrange for the attack in the hotel.

Either he must have arranged it beforehand, by letter—or he must have seen someone at the air-field.

Whichever was right, one thing was certain. He must have had a great deal of money, for the attempts had to be paid for—and attempted murder is usually a costly thing.

On his uncle's assurance, however, Peter knew that Ricardo was badly in need of money. Why, then, had he wasted money he needed on bribing men to make those various attempts on the *Pioneer* and its crew? Obviously Ricardo could not have done them himself, for if he had been recognised in Heston, the game would have been finished almost before it had been started.

The money element, and the fact that Ricardo had thrown away a great chance of

getting the lead, puzzled Peter a great deal, and he tried to find an explanation that would cover both of them.

And as they went the sea was rolling beneath them, not quite so calm, now, and with a suggestion of a haze ahead of them.

After six hours flying, Peter was relieved by Tim Allen from the controls. For once he did not fall asleep easily. He was haunted by visions of Ricardo's sharp features, his swarthy face, when the Spaniard had flown alongside the *Pioneer*, intent only on bringing it down.

Peter smiled a little to himself.

By now the news of the *Pioneer's* arrival and departure from Shanghai would be known throughout the world. Ricardo would not hear of it, of course, until he reached Honolulu. What a shock he would get! The six men he thought to be at the mercy of the jungle were safe and sound.

James Lacre happened to look round at that moment, and saw Peter's smile.

"Hallo!" he said. "What's amusing you, young 'un?"

"I was thinking of Ricardo's face when he learns we're all right," said Peter.

The others chuckled, but James Lacre said slowly.

"Better not think too much about the Ricardo business, Peter. It's not good for you —yet."

Peter guessed what his uncle meant, and appreciated the wisdom of the words. In a long flight like this, with the monotony of the

same thing, minute after minute, hour after hour, it was easy to brood over things, and to allow them to obsess one. An obsession of an unpleasant nature, such as the attempt at murdering them, could not do any good, and it might do a great deal of harm. Peter knew it would be easy to get so worked up, possibly thinking of ways and means of avenging himself, until he could think of nothing else.

Such a thing could easily lead to a break-down. The human mind could only stand a certain amount, and the big danger of long distance flights was that the pilots would suffer from nervous strain, and consequently severe illness.

Peter had read of these things before, and he could well understand how they came about. All the same, he had an idea floating round in his mind about the flight, and Ricardo's share in it, and he believed he would not be able to forget it until he had talked about it. So he said quietly.

"There is just one thing, Uncle——"

James Lacre grinned.

"All right, let it come."

"Well," said Peter, haltingly. "First, it must have cost a lot of money to have organised these attacks on us——"

"I've thought of that myself," admitted his uncle.

"Second," went on Peter, more cheerfully, "it seems funny to me that Ricardo is wasting so much time."

There was a moment's silence in the cabin. Tim Allen grunted at last, and James Lacre nodded thoughtfully.

"Same thing's struck us, young 'un. Well, what do you make of it? Or have you just seen the things, and got stuck?"

Peter hesitated. He knew he was taking a lot for granted. On the other hand there was a good reason for the idea that had presented itself to him.

"Well, there is one thing I've thought of," he said. "Supposing Ricardo isn't working by himself——"

He paused a moment, and saw his uncle's face was very grim. He wondered whether the other had thought of the same thing. More than likely he had.

"I mean," he went on, "supposing Ricardo *and Haufman* are working together? That would explain everything. Haufman has plenty of money, but he wants to win the race in order to make his new machine famous. Ricardo won't care whether he wins the race or not, providing he gets good pay. So if Haufman was paying him, it would explain the reason why Ricardo waited behind, for us. He was making sure that Haufman had a good start."

There was silence again for a minute. Tim Allen grunted at last:

"That sounds tall to me, young 'un."

"It doesn't to me," said James Lacre, quietly. "I've been playing with the same idea, as a matter of fact. Look at it squarely, Tim, and you'll see it's not so unlikely."

"But what will Ricardo get out of it?" asked Tim Allen.

"We don't know, for certain," said Lacre. "But supposing this race resulted in—well, orders for five hundred 'planes of the *Haufman* specification. They'll cost at least three thousand pounds each, so that's a million and a half pounds worth of orders. There would be a tremendous profit in that, and it would be possible to pay Ricardo twenty thousand pounds, or even more, in addition to his expenses. Moreover, it's quite likely that the sales of the machines would reach a lot more than five hundred. Private people all over the world would buy them, and many of the smaller countries, which have no aeroplane makers of their own, would place orders for large fleets of them."

Tim Allen nodded.

He was completely convinced now, that there was a possibility of Ricardo and Haufman working together.

Peter was delighted to realise that his uncle had thought of the possibility, and when James Lacre said quietly:

"In effect, Ricardo is acting as a pace-maker for Haufman, and making sure no one overtakes him."

Peter said quickly:

"That's just what I think, Uncle. It's impossible for a man to concentrate on the flight, *and* on causing trouble to the other fliers."

There was a general agreement now, and with

the thing off his mind Peter soon dropped into an untroubled sleep.

He was awakened after five hours, for his turn at the controls. It was pitch dark now, and the monoplane was dipping a little, although the wind was not serious.

"There's no rain about," said James Lacre, as he settled down for his rest. "And we've done over two thousand, Peter, in eleven hours' flying."

It was good going, and Peter felt very cheerful as he took his place. But night-flying over the sea was not pleasant. Now he could see nothing at all, for there were no stars; now and again low flying clouds enveloped the *Pioneer* in a thick mist, some of which forced its way into the cabin.

They were flying closer to the sea than they did to the land, and dimly the roar of the waves came to his ears. There was something eerie about it, something ghostly. Yet at the same time there was a grandeur Peter hardly understood.

They were absolutely alone.

No one was within a thousand miles of them, there was little shipping, there was no land. They were absolutely cut off from the world, and if any trouble developed with the engines they stood practically no chance of rescue.

Peter shook off his thoughts, which grew rather gloomy. He began to think of what he had been doing this time in the previous year.

February, getting towards the end of the football season. He had played right back for

Raeside, and he had had a good season. He remembered, however, that all his spare time he had devoted to studying books on aeroplanes. Not merely records of flights and wonderful stories of great solo efforts and long-distance records, but mechanical books. Thank goodness he had done so! Without the knowledge he had had when he had first started at Heston he could never have got on so well as he had done.

In those far off days he had dreamed of piloting his own machine, and sometimes he had let himself pretend he would accompany his famous uncle on some of his flights. But Peter had never thought they would be anything but dreams.

It seemed hardly possible, even now, that it was all true.

He remembered, like something that had happened in another world, the newspaper headlines that he had seen at the different towns and cities where they had called. His name had been right across the headlines, not only in England, but in Athens, Kabul, Shanghai, Yokohama. He could imagine how many of the big English papers had talked about him.

Now he was alone, he was not worried by the embarrassment which always came over him if someone else talked of his performances. He felt a glow of satisfaction that his efforts had been generally known, and appreciated. He lived again through the terrifying hour while he had crouched on the wing of the

Pioneer, working at the engine and wondering, even now, how he had managed to hold on.

In his mind's eye, too, he saw the lands which they had crossed, rolling out in front of him. The great mountains, the rocky hills of Turkey and Afghanistan, a hundred other things came to his mind. It was like the pages of a book, filled with pictures of the past. But perhaps the most remarkable thing was that he had never before been out of England!

Now he had traversed over half of the world.

He knew that many other lads of his own age would have given almost anything to have had his opportunity, and he realised he had been exceptionally lucky. He owed it all to James Lacre, of course.

He remembered the day when he had left Raeside, and had been to Lords, and a theatre, with his uncle. On the morning after they had talked of his career.

His career!

What a wonderful start he had made! He had gained more experience in this trip than he could have gained in three or four years of flying in England or, perhaps, part of Europe. He would have a tremendous advantage over many other fliers who had never taken part in a long distance flight. He had, in fact, graduated as a first-class pilot in an astonishingly short time.

And he owed it all to James Lacre.

Peter did not owe it entirely to his uncle, of course, although it was well that he was grateful for all the help he had had. On the

other hand, unless he had been possessed of the strong nerve and the readiness to defy danger, he would never have got through the ordeal as he had. Most men who make their fame as pilots are born for the air, and Peter Grey was one of them.

He laughed a little, suddenly, although the thought that struck him was not laughable.

He realised that if anything went wrong, his speedy graduation would not be worth a great deal. Fame was of little use to a dead man!

He had hardly finished laughing when something happened.

Vaguely, as though from a long way off, he heard a hiss, like that of escaping steam. Then, without further warning, the monoplane was surrounded by a terrific rainstorm!

The rain came down like sheets. It cracked against the wings, the cabin and the fuselage, streamed down the windows, hissed about the 'plane like a live thing. The din woke James Lacre, who peered out of the window. The lights from the cabin shone on the rain, glistening like diamonds.

And then the wind, which had fallen a little, came again.

It howled round the monoplane, and the gallant machine seemed to be lifted a tremendous height, and then dropped down like a stone. Peter wrestled with the controls, but they seemed as if they would not obey him. The pressure of the wind was terrific. The monoplane was tossed about like a feather,

helpless in the teeth of the gale that had come with such terrifying suddenness.

"Alter the course," James Lacre called out suddenly. "No use heading into it."

Peter and Tim Allen obeyed quickly.

Immediately they felt the beneficial result of the change, although Peter was secretly disappointed that they had been forced off their course. They had been flying as the crow for fourteen hours; another four hours of direct flight would have seen them at Honolulu. But obviously it was best to take a little longer than run the risk of being forced down.

How long they battled against the fury of that storm Peter hardly knew, but at last he heaved a sigh of relief as the wind abated a little. Soon the rain stopped, and the stars came out, speckling the sky with little yellow glows.

The silence about them now was startling, after the turmoil of the storm. Peace reigned here. It seemed hardly possible that ten minutes before they had been flying in the teeth of the furies.

It was wonderful to see the heavens stretching out, above and ahead of them, a deep blue bowl with those millions of twinkling lights. It was a delight, too, to feel they had battled yet again through trouble. How close they had been to the disaster that had dogged their footsteps all the journey, Peter didn't fully realise. But an hour later, when the first grey light of dawn crept across the heavens, he saw it.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "We're no more than fifty feet above the sea!"

It was true.

The monoplane had been forced down until it had almost touched the surface of those treacherous waters. They had known that they were flying low, but at the crucial moment, it was discovered, the altimeter—or the instrument that told them their height—had failed. According to it they had never gone lower than three hundred feet, while actually they must have been within a few feet of the swirling water a dozen times during the storm.

James Lacre, who had awakened a few minutes before Peter's cry, said grimly:

"Well, luck's with us this trip, all right. But we've lost about three hundred miles, I reckon."

With Tim Allen he worked out their position. As far as they could judge they were within eight hundred miles of Honolulu. It was now seven o'clock, and with luck in the way of weather they would reach the island by midday.

After the storm, the weather went back to its good behaviour. So far, of course, they had been fortunate; for the most part the weather had been set fair.

Peter relinquished the controls at eight o'clock, had a light breakfast of chicken sandwiches and hot coffee from the thermos, and then dropped into a doze. He was awakened by a cry from Tim Allen.

"*Land ahoy!*"

Peter was awake on the instance. He peered out of the window, and he saw the stretch of

land Tim had called out about. Was it Honolulu?

He looked his question at his uncle, who smiled.

"Yes, Peter. We're there. The Honolulu non-stop."

Peter grinned with delight. He looked at his watch, and saw it still wanted ten minutes to twelve. They had done the flight in rather less than twenty-four hours.

The question was—how had the other machines fared?

CHAPTER XIX

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS BEHIND

THERE was not the same sized crowd on the great American island as there had been at the other ports of call, although everyone in Honolulu had come out to honour them. Peter was amazed by the gorgeous scene that met his eyes. As they flew low they saw luxuriant vegetation, flowers of startling hues, birds that flittered across the woods like streaks of glittering fire.

He had arrived at a perfect moment for seeing the beauty of the island, and from above the thing was revealed to him at its best. The sun was shining down with a fierce heat, and the birds of the woods had come out to worship it.

Before they reached land, moreover, Peter saw many of the natives, walking, working in the fields, or running towards the landing place. Most of the men were naked but for a pair of gaily-coloured shorts, and the sun gleamed on their brown shoulders. The women and girls, their hair streaming behind them as they ran fleet-footed to greet the men from the skies, were dressed in all manner of multi-coloured frocks and kimonos. It was one of the gayest sights Peter Grey had ever seen, and always

afterwards he thought of Honolulu of a place of colour and gaiety.

American and English officials hurried to greet them as they landed—making, as usual, a perfect descent.

Peter climbed out of the cabin, absolutely delighted.

The worst stage of the flight was over. They had made it without the slightest trouble—for the storm could hardly be called trouble—and as they landed, all three engines were purring beautifully. Apart from a quick examination, oiling, and the repair of the altimeter, there was nothing to keep them long at Honolulu.

The official here was an American named Grant. He was a comparatively young man, and he spoke with the long, soft-sounding drawl of a man from the Southern states.

"Waal," he said as he shook hands with all three of them, "I'm right glad to see youh all safe, gentlemen. Now you'll be wanting something to eat, I guess. Let's get to the club."

James Lacre waited a few minutes, to give instructions to the engineer who was at hand, and looked personally at the engines. They looked fine, he assured the others.

The flight had been looked on as a state function in Honolulu, and there was a regular feast already arranged at the delightful club building, on the edge of the landing field. The multi-coloured flowers were spread about the room in great profusion. Englishmen and others in immaculate white drill suits, ladies

dressed in light, cool flowered material, made up a wonderful picture. Peter could not help smiling to himself as he contrasted his own dirty overalls with the clothes of these people.

But James Lacre had decided to be off again almost at once.

They would have to stay an hour, for refuelling and a quick inspection, but they were all three anxious to start the next stage, especially after the news they received.

Haufman had arrived forty-eight hours before, but two of his five engines had been out of action. He had battled for hours through a tremendous storm, and he had limped into Honolulu with one sound engine and two that were knocking badly. No matter how hard the mechanics had worked, there was a delay of just over twenty-four hours for the Austrian.

It was obvious, although these good people said very little, that Haufman had not created a very good impression.

Apparently he had raved and shouted at the engineers, and had made himself thoroughly unpleasant. His arrogance and his rudeness had annoyed the aerodrome engineer, who told the three pilots a little of what had happened. It had been a very half-hearted godspeed from the officials and guests of the Honolulu Club which had sent Haufman off, just twenty-three hours before the *Pioneer* had arrived.

Nor had Ricardo, in the *Granada*, done much better.

He was at best a surly fellow, and although he had been smiling at first, he seemed to have

altered after he had been given the news of the flight.

It was obvious to Peter and the others that Ricardo had received a terrible shock when he had learned of the *Pioneer's* escape. Peter chuckled.

Graffhein, the German, had been a great deal more popular.

The cheerful, fair-headed Teuton was, in fact, popular wherever he went. He took bad fortune philosophically, and good fortune gratefully.

Ricardo, they learned, had made a good Pacific flight, and had arrived fifteen hours after Haufman.

"And," said Grant, the tall, broad-shouldered American, "Haufman and Ricardo didn't hit it off very well, gentlemen. They were surely bad friends before Haufman went off."

This was news, with a vengeance!

It was obvious to the men on the *Pioneer* that Ricardo had told Haufman, at Shanghai or Yokohama, that the *Angel* and the *Pioneer* would never be seen again. Obviously the news of the monoplane's arrival at Shanghai had caused a quarrel.

This lent even more colour to the theory that Ricardo was really acting as a pacemaker to the new Austrian machine.

Grant eyed James Lacre speculatively. It seemed as if the shrewd-eyed American suspected there was something wrong. But Lacre gave nothing away.

He had a good reason for this, for he had no desire for the newspapers nake a great play

of the murderous attacks during the race. It would take the public interest away from the flight, and a thing that was without parallel in the annals of flying history would be hauled through the mud, brought to the level of a cheap murder case.

James Lacre had the interests of flying close to his heart. If it was at all possible he wanted to make sure that the world at large never knew the whole truth. Hence he said nothing to Grant, who asked no direct questions.

There was, however, a pause after Grant had mentioned the quarrel between Ricardo and Haufman. Peter broke it as he asked:

"What time did Graffhein arrive?"

"He did vurry well," said Grant. "Ten hours after Ricardo, and he only stopped an hour."

Peter was really pleased. If the *Pioneer* could not get home first, he would rather Graffhein arrived at Lympne before the others. But the position of the race was still very open. There were over eight thousand miles still to go, and the leader, Haufman, was only twenty-four hours ahead.

As he was having a quick wash, Peter realised for the first time the amazing achievements that had already been recorded. It was a startling record of this great flight, which would surely have no parallel in modern times.

So far, seventeen thousand miles had been flown by the four machines still in the race, and the *Haufman* had completed the distance in the astounding time of a hundred and nine

hours—or about four and a half days! That included Haufman's waiting time at Honolulu.

The other machines had not, really, been a long way behind.

Ricardo, still flying second, had left Honolulu four hours after the Austrian, and his time was a hundred and thirteen hours. Graffhein had been eleven hours after the Spaniard, with a hundred and twenty-four hours, and the *Pioneer*, when it rose again, would have taken a hundred and thirty-two hours, in all.

For the *Pioneer*, this meant an average speed, including all stops, of a hundred and thirty miles an hour!

While he was waiting for James Lacre and Tim Allen, who were talking with Grant, Peter took a piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket, and jotted down some figures. They ran:

Haufman . . .	24	hours	ahead
Ricardo . . .	20	,,	,,
Graffhein . . .	9	,,	,,

There were now three more stopping places. First, there was a 2,000 miles hop to San Francisco, then the trans-America flight to New York, and finally the great Atlantic race to England, a little more than eight thousand miles altogether. Of the three flights, the American one was the least likely to create any risk, for they would be flying over land all the way, and at no time would they be completely out of touch with civilization. The two thousand miles hop to San Francisco was

a bagatelle compared with the Pacific flight that had already been completed, while there would be a great deal more shipping on the route.

At the island, Peter learned that a number of rich Americans were in their yachts, steaming between the U.S.A. and the island in the hope of catching sight of the fliers. There was little or no trouble likely on this next flight, and if the weather remained fair there was every likelihood that they would be in San Francisco in a little more than ten hours—or at nine o'clock, Greenwich time, that night.

In America it would be about four o'clock. Now they were travelling almost all the time with the sun—a big advantage. True, they had had several stretches of night travelling, but for the most part they had been lucky.

Deep in his figures, Peter was startled by his uncle's voice as he called out:

"Come on, young 'un. Time to be off."

Peter put his pencil and paper away, shook hands with the officials, and hurried to the *Pioneer*. He climbed in, and the others were with him, about to start, when Grant rushed up to the 'plane and tapped at the window. He was bearing a slip of paper.

Peter opened the door quickly.

"Haufman left 'Frisco an hour ago," gasped Grant. "Ricardo is still there, and Graffhein's been sighted."

"Thanks!" roared Peter.

He closed the cabin door, and the 'plane moved off, its usual graceful start. Once again

Peter looked down, to see that marvellously variegated scene, the colourful island of Honolulu—but this time he had very little opportunity for reflection.

"Haufman left an hour ago," he shouted across the cabin joyfully. "If we can make it in ten hours, we'll have halved his lead!"

The others shouted in their jubilation. Keen-eyed, grim-faced, ready to take any risks, they set the nose of the *Pioneer* towards San Francisco. They did not know, then, what had delayed Haufman. He must have had a terribly bad flight on that two thousand miles hop. But it certainly looked as if the crew of the *Pioneer* were at last having a fair share of luck.

Peter was resting in the spare seat. His uncle and Tim Allen sat together at the controls, and the throttle was opened wider and wider. Five minutes after leaving Honolulu, the monoplane was travelling at over two hundred miles, like a bullet through the air.

Assuming Haufman was in fairly good shape at 'Frisco, he would be away in an hour, and he would start the last stage but one of the great flight with a twelve hour lead, or rather less if the *Pioneer* could keep up this marvellous speed. On the other hand, as Haufman had been so late in reaching the great U.S.A. port it was probable that he would have to wait there some time, for repairs. The *Pioneer* might be only a few hours behind.

The excitement of the race was getting in their blood, now. Nothing else mattered but speed. They forgot the possibility of danger,

they refused to contemplate the fact that as they were flying over two thousand miles of water, they might never reach 'Frisco. After the trials of the early part of the flight, this seemed easy. It was, in effect, a tremendous dash that would either bring them up so that they were seriously challenging the leaders, or bring them to disaster or a delay that would put them out of the race.

The three great engines roared, the *Pioneer* swept over the sea, which was shimmering blue and grey beneath them. They kept about five hundred feet above the level of the water, and all the time they blessed the good fortune that enabled them to fly in good weather.

Now and again they sighted a small steamer, frequently they saw a steam-yacht, glistening white, steaming proudly with the great white crests of the waves behind it. The *Pioneer* went as low as it dared, on these occasions, and the crew could see the men and women on the decks, waving frantically.

On and on they went, and as the hours passed they grew more and more tense with excitement. The engines were behaving perfectly. They had no reason to expect trouble, and it seemed as if they would make the San Francisco flight without a hitch. There was no sign of a break in the weather, and now and again they caught a radio message, sent out to them from America, telling them the barometer was rising. Conditions were set fair.

Although they did get the radio messages, and occasionally they listened into a snatch

of music that was humming over the ether, not once did a call come from any of the other three 'planes ahead. That suggested there was no trouble.

They had left Honolulu at two o'clock. Towards eight, darkness began to fall. The sun sank below the horizon, a wonderful ball of gleaming fire that seemed to set the sea alight. It was an amazing spectacle, perhaps the finest Peter had ever seen in his life. He looked ahead of him, spell-bound. Was there to be no end to the wonders he would see on this great flight?

The humming of the engines was music in his ears, after darkness fell. Again the stars were brilliant in the heavens, giving a strange impression of illimitable space. Again they seemed to be flying in a tremendous void.

Yet to-night was different from the previous night when they had been across the Pacific, with their object the comparatively small island. Their goal, now, was the huge continent of America—one they could not miss.

Last night Peter had felt his nerves fraying. To-night he felt on top of the world, as if there was nothing that could worry him. He remembered the days when he had been at school and had entered for the school sports. Prior to the races he had run he had felt nervous. In the long distance runs. when he had lagged behind, letting the others get well ahead, yet tire themselves, he had felt the same. Then, as he warmed up, as the end came in sight and he stretched his legs to the uttermost and

called on every reserve of energy, he had forgotten his nervousness in the excitement of the race.

Now it was very much the same.

The biggest part of the great flight was over. They would soon be in the straight for home. All they thought of was forcing a little more speed from the wonderful machine they were flying—and the *Pioneer* did not let them down.

Through the darkness they went on and on, the engines roaring like great organs. Certainly the roar was music in their ears.

Peter relinquished the controls, at ten o'clock, to his uncle. He was sure that he would not fall asleep, but he was more tired than he realised, for he was soon completely oblivious to his surroundings. Meanwhile Tim Allen and James Lacre conversed in undertones. They were excited, just as Peter had been. Their only thought was speed.

It was just after one o'clock when they sighted land.

Tim Allen could not restrain himself. He let out a tremendous bellow of delight that awakened Peter with a start. Peter jumped up, and looked out of the window.

Then perhaps the most amazing sight he had ever seen in his life met his eyes.

There was a stretch of blackness below, that seemed as if it was impenetrable. Then, suddenly, the coast of California was lit up with thousands and thousands of lights that, from the air, looked like fairy lights dancing in the breeze.

San Francisco had a long coast-line, and that night no lights had been put out—everyone was up and waiting for the sound of the *Pioneer's* engine. No one loved bravery and courage more than the great American people, and the exploits of the crew of the *Pioneer*, particularly the youngest member, had fired their imagination.

America's two entrants had had bad luck at the beginning of the race, and this might well have tempered their enthusiasm, but it had done nothing of the kind. They were waiting in their hundreds of thousands in the air-field outside San Francisco, searching the skies for the lights of the *Pioneer*.

While Peter and the men with him looked down on that gigantic spectacle, saw the electric lights gleaming, saw the great flares and the searchlights in the air-field, for their guidance, and felt a great thrill, perhaps the biggest they had had since they had started out.

Uncle Sam had a reputation for doing things in a big style, and Peter Grey realised just what this meant as the *Pioneer* went gradually downwards. In the middle of the night these people were gathered as if it was mid-day. The roaring came to Peter's ears before they reached the ground, as if it was the noise of thunder from a long way off.

Searchlights played over the crowds as well as into the heavens. Thousands upon thousands of faces, very white and strange in the fierce lights, were turned upwards. Thousands of

mouths were open, to shout, flags were waving, and, as the monoplane touched the ground and Peter opened the cabin door, a great burst of music met his ears.

Massed bands were in attendance!

It was the most astonishing welcome Peter could have conceived. In fact, he felt dazed by it. It was beyond anything he had ever dreamed about.

It even swamped the realization of the most important thing. They had reached San Francisco in eleven hours' flying from Honolulu—an average speed of two hundred miles an hour!

Despite the size of the crowd, and its enthusiasm, it was orderly. Lines of police and troops were round the ropes that kept the landing field clear, and a delegation of about twenty men and women were waiting. As soon as the monoplane stopped, the delegation came forward.

Peter stepped down, with the others, and he immediately understood something of the methods of American organization. A youngish man, whose name he afterwards learned was Morgan, was the first to greet them and speak.

"Well done, *Pioneer*," he said with a frank, engaging grin. "We're right glad to see you. Now, Mr. Lacre, give your instructions. The mechanics are waiting——"

He broke off, and waved his hands towards the left. There were two little groups of men waiting, ready to swarm over the *Pioneer* and get to work on it.

James Lacre gave his instructions quickly. The engines were to be oiled and looked over, the instruments tested. He wanted to be off in an hour.

"That's the spirit," grinned the young man. "Now, we'll get into the club, gentlemen, and eat. You'll be good enough to meet the Mayor, and two of San Francisco's Senators, I'll hope."

James Lacre smilingly assented. Introductions were made, Peter was congratulated, with the others, but it was all done quickly, and with as little fuss as possible. Morgan, the Flight official, obviously realised they would not want to spend any time in talking. First they were guided to a bathroom, where they had a welcome wash. Then they sat down to a light meal, in company with nearly five hundred men and women—the high lights of San Francisco society.

At Morgan's request, James Lacre spoke a few words. A table at which press men sat, took down his words verbatim. Then the Mayor of San Francisco stood up, amidst cheers.

"Mr. Lacre and your brave crew," he said, in a rather deep, nasal voice, "you'll not be wanting to listen to a lot of speech-making. For one thing you haven't time. So in the name of San Francisco and the United States, I welcome you, and tell you that your flight has been the marvel of our time. You have the praise and good wishes not only of this country but of all the world. Ladies and gentlemen——"

The mayor waved his hands. A band that Peter had not seen before struck up the tune of:

"*For he's a jolly good fellow*"

And the great gathering, every man and woman on their feet sang to the soul-stirring refrain with tremendous enthusiasm.

Never in his life had Peter Grey been so stirred. Absurd though it was, his eyes filled with tears, and he knew that if he had been offered a thousand pounds to speak, at that moment, he could not have done so. He could see that his uncle and Tim Allen were just as moved.

At last it was over.

The band struck up the American National Anthem, and then Morgan, still spokesman, spoke easily to James Lacre.

"Well, Mr. Lacre—your hour's nearly up. You'll be wanting to get back to the *Pioneer*."

Lacre nodded and smiled. The three pilots, with only Morgan to accompany them, went out of the great room, which was echoing and re-echoing with cheers.

"Well," said Lacre, as they got outside, "that's the finest tribute I've ever had paid to me, Mr. Morgan."

Morgan smiled cheerfully.

"It's no more than you deserve," he said. "Now, you'll want to know just how your other fliers are placed. Here's the latest news."

He took a slip of paper from his pocket, and the crew of the *Pioneer* crowded round him, eagerly. Had they gained on the others?

CHAPTER XX

ACROSS AMERICA

THEY had.

But perhaps the biggest surprise was that Graffhein, in the *Deutschland*, had gained on Ricardo, and had left San Francisco three hours ahead of the Spaniard.

When, ten minutes after they had the latest figures and times of the flight given them, the men of the *Pioneer* swooped upwards once again, they were hard on the heels of their rivals.

Ricardo was only five hours ahead. Graffhein was eight hours ahead, three hours in front of Ricardo, and only three hours behind Haufman, who was still in the lead. But Haufman's big lead had been considerably reduced. Eleven hours only separated the Austrian, placed first, from the English 'plane, placed fourth.

Eleven hours, instead of forty-eight!

Haufman, it seemed, had had more trouble on the flight to San Francisco. His engines had been badly laboured, and he had been forced to wait nearly twenty-four hours. The new machine had been flogged almost to death in the first stages of the flight, and now it would probably give trouble until the race was over.

Ricardo, too, had been running on only two engines, and had been forced to wait for repairs. Graffhein, on the other hand, had made the flight from Honolulu in wonderful time—he had taken thirteen hours only, and as his machine's record achievement was a little under two hundred miles an hour, that had been wonderful going.

"Well," said Tim Allen, as they finished studying the position, "we've got a rattling good chance now, lads."

"We'll do it," said James Lacre, "if——"

He paused for a moment, and looked gravely at his crew. Peter did not immediately understand his expression, but then he realised a thing of vital importance.

Ricardo was only three hours in front of them!

It was obvious, now, that the *Pioneer* would be on the heels of the *Haufman* during the last stage of the flight. Ricardo, if he was working for the Austrian—and it was almost certain that he was—could hamper them without any trouble.

True, he could not harm Graffhein now. But that merely increased the chances of an attack being made on the *Pioneer*.

"It's no use blinding ourselves to it," said James Lacre. "We are in danger from Ricardo. The chances of an attack are great, and it is almost certain it will take place in the dark. Over America the chances of his being seen will make it impossible for him to cause trouble during the day."

Peter nodded. Tim said thoughtfully:

"But he'll know we've reported the previous attack. Isn't he likely to refuse to do anything more for Haufman?"

"I don't think so," said James Lacre. "Remember, Ricardo will never dare to show his face again in England, or any country where he might be arrested—for there will be an arrest, after the flight's finished. There isn't any doubt about it."

The others nodded. There was silence for a while. It was a darkling thought, a blot on the fair name of flying, and nothing could keep it entirely from their minds.

"Well," went on James Lacre, "Ricardo will be a fugitive. He'll be worse off than ever, unless he gets paid by Haufman. We can be pretty sure that Haufman won't pay him unless he succeeds in keeping us away, so it seems to me that Ricardo will *have* to take another chance."

Again the others nodded.

In the past few minutes the excitement of the race had been forgotten. Now all they thought about was Ricardo, and the possibility of an attack from the air.

It was obvious, of course, that Ricardo would attack during the night—James Lacre was undoubtedly right there. And the more they thought about the situation, the more they were convinced that an attack would come.

Peter's uncle had summed the situation up well.

Ricardo would be a fugitive from justice after this. Although silence had been kept so

far, the truth of the affair over China would come out. No matter how well he got on in the race, Ricardo would never finish at London. He would be a criminal, an outcast—and, if their assumptions about the connection between Ricardo and Haufman were right—he would be entirely dependent on the Austrian.

Obviously Haufman would not pay the Spaniard much money if he failed to do what it appeared was the object of the connection—that was, prevent the *Pioneer* and the other 'planes from overhauling the *Haufman.*

Peter knew perfectly well that it was because the *Pioneer* had been the most likely danger to the Austrian that it had been attacked, with the *Angel.* And apart from Graffhein, the *Pioneer* was still the most dangerous threat to Haufman's leadership. It was, of course, impossible to judge what would happen to Graffhein, but the crew of the monoplane thought it probable that Haufman himself would take care of Graffhein, leaving them to the Spaniard.

A great deal of this was guess-work, of course, but there was much to suggest that their assumptions were right. What other explanation could there be of the quarrel between Haufman and Ricardo at Honolulu?

Silent with their thoughts, the crew of the monoplane sat in their seats, fully expecting trouble at any minute. The keen exhilaration of the past few hours was gone, now. In its place was a tense expectancy.

What would happen?

Peter had little time to think of anything else. Nevertheless he looked down at the land, and saw things which reminded him of the amazing welcome they had had at San Francisco.

Their route had been carefully mapped out for them, and the American people had made as sure as possible that they were guided. Beneath them, at regular intervals, great flares were showing. It was almost impossible for them to lose their way. At different places out in the wilds, cars had met, and shone their headlamps together, making a white glow which the pilots could not miss. Right across America that chain of lights and flares ran, and hardly once in the first three hours of the flight were they out of sight of a signal from below.

Their hearts warmed. This was American hospitality!

Peter wished, in a way, that it was daylight, so that he could see more of the land over which they were flying.

They had already crossed the most difficult part of the flight—the Rocky Mountains, that great range of hills stretching from the United States to Canada that had been the death-knell of many an airman. Now, Peter judged, they were flying over Nevada. Soon they would be across Utah, Colorado and Nebraska.

The very names conjured up visions of his boyhood days to Peter Grey.

The stories of the Wild West, many of them founded on fact, came back to him. He remembered that wonderful film, *The Covered Wagon*,

which had seemed to him one of the most amazing spectacles ever presented on the screen. They were flying, now, over country such as those olden-day pioneers had travelled, waging their ceaseless fight against the Redskins.

Pioneers!

How amazed those old time heroes, whose name had been taken by Lacre for the monoplane, would have been to-day. Never would they have dreamed that the time was to come when the land which they fought for, inch by inch, was to be flown over by great birds of the air. They would have laughed such an idea to scorn.

Yet it was little more than forty years ago since some of the fiercest battles against the Redskins had been fought. Forty years! What an amazing march of progress had come about since those old days. To Peter, it was almost incredible that there had actually been a time when motor vehicles were objects of fear or derision, when thirty miles an hour was considered dangerous, on the ground.

Thirty miles an hour, compared with the performance of the aeroplanes in this great flight, was nothing.

In the olden days it had taken months to cross the world. Probably no one could have got round the hemisphere in less than six or eight months, in the days when the veterans of the trail were forging ahead in the wild country over which the *Pioneer* was flying. Eight months! And the *Pioneer* had almost been round the world in less than five days.

At the present rate, seven days would see them back in London. Seven days, when fifty years ago it could not have been traversed in seven months!

It was an inspiring thought, and for a while Peter was so busy in the past that he forgot the ever-present danger of Ricardo.

At five o'clock the dawn began to break over the country, a grey dawn that gave promise of bad weather. Heavy banks of clouds gathered ahead of them, and now a strong wind was coming up, happily behind and not in front of them.

Peter woke up from a doze soon after five o'clock, and he saw the eerie greyness stretching out in front of him. He saw beneath a vast, yellow plain, that looked devoid of any kind of habitation. No flares were in sight, now. They were flying over wildest America, where nothing would grow, because of the lack of water. The plains beneath were arid, almost as useless to mankind as the Sahara.

"Good heavens!" Peter gasped suddenly. "Ricardo's not been seen!"

Tim and James Lacre grunted.

They had passed a tiring night, for all the time their nerves had been strained, and when the first moaning of the wind had come they had believed it to be the sound of another aeroplane. Now that dawn was breaking, however, they felt that they would be safe.

James Lacre said as much.

The others agreed, but Peter secretly doubted whether it was wise to think they had escaped

from the trouble which they had believed was near them.

In the cold light of dawn, over this great waste desert, he told himself Ricardo had a wonderful chance to make his attempt. Ricardo had probably fought shy of making an attack by night.

Obviously James Lacre had something of the same thing in mind, despite his words. He turned round, and said to Peter:

"Get the glasses out, young 'un, and see if there's anything to see."

Peter obeyed at once.

With the special long distance glasses to his eyes, he swept the surrounding heavens. In the distance the great banks of clouds looked threatening and ominous. Was it possible, wondered the lad, that they hid not only rain and wind—but death in the form of bullets? Was the *Granada*, with its murderous pilots, waiting, ready to pounce out of the clouds on their victims, giving no mercy, taking no risk of failure this time?

Ricardo must have wondered why the truth had not yet been told about the crash of the *Angel*, and the forced landing of the other monoplane. He might have reasoned that the pilots would say nothing. He might believe that if he could crash them, this time to their death, he would have nothing to fear.

Such thoughts flashed through Peter's mind as he stared out. Behind them, and to the north and south, there was nothing to be seen. No specks of black spoiled the blue serenity

of the early morning sky. Ahead of them were dark, storm-carrying clouds.

Suddenly, without a second's warning, two banks of clouds seemed to break apart.

It was a terrifying spectacle, at first.

Like the clouds at a stormy sunset which split asunder to let a last, red ray of the sun shoot through, these broke apart to reveal a stretch of blue sky that seemed to dazzle his eyes. He looked away for a moment, and then looked ahead again.

As he did so, his body tensed.

Breathing hard, he strained every nerve to concentrate on his search. There was something ahead, something in that stretch of morning sky, which he couldn't understand.

It was little more than a dark speck, thrown up into relief. But as the seconds flew it grew larger—*and it was moving upwards.*

Peter waited until he was quite sure there was something there. Then he snapped:

"'Plane ahead—between the clouds."

"Glasses!" snapped James Lacre.

Peter handed the glasses over. His uncle left the controls to Tim Allen, and stared ahead of him. After a few seconds he dropped the binoculars.

"It's an aeroplane all right," he said in a very grim voice. "It's gone up into the clouds again. Peter—get those guns out."

"You think it's Ricardo?" Peter asked in a voice that he scarcely recognised as his own.

"I'm not sure of anything," said his uncle, "but I don't know why any other 'plane should

have deliberately gone into the clouds. They're high, and a passenger 'bus would have wanted to get below them."

Peter nodded, and went to one of the little cupboards. In a few seconds he had the automatics out. He kept two for himself, and handed two each to the other pilots.

They took them without a word.

James Lacre dived a little, and flew as low as he reasonably could. Peter knew why. If it was Ricardo's 'plane ahead, he wanted to be as far away from the clouds as possible, so as to prevent the Spaniard from making his attack a surprise one.

No word was said, now. All three of them realised they were on the brink of disaster. They believed it was the *Granada* ahead of them, and they knew Ricardo had a machine-gun. Even though they were prepared for trouble, they stood very little chance.

It was a grim five minutes.

Without lessening speed, the *Pioneer* went on.

It was six o'clock now, and they had been going for four hours. Over eight hundred miles was between them and San Francisco. In normal circumstances they would have been well pleased with their achievement, but now they could only think of that black speck in the sky—and the last time they had met the *Granada*. Providence had enabled them to escape, before. Would it help them now?

So deep was their conviction of coming trouble that not one of them seriously contemplated the possibility that they had been

mistaken. But for half an hour, nothing happened.

They were in the fringe of the clouds now, and the darkness ahead was impenetrable. Tight-lipped, they waited and watched. It was Tim Allen's turn to rest, but he did not move from his seat.

Then, without warning, the rain came.

It seemed to belch from the sky in torrents. The *Pioneer* might have been battling in the sea. Hissing and seething, the rain smashed against the monoplane, and a wind sprang up to toss them helplessly right and left. They had no time, now, to think of Ricardo. Every ounce of their mental energy was wanted to steer the 'plane through this rainstorm.

Lower and lower they went, until the ground was less than a thousand feet beneath them. It seemed that they could not keep their altitude, that the storm would force them down.

Peter Grey could not help smiling a little, grimly, at this trick of fate.

They had been prepared for an attack from a man, but not from nature. At least, he thought, they could fight nature, and they stood a good chance of coming off best. With Ricardo it was the other way about.

They fought the elements for an hour, rising and falling as they could, battling full out. All the time the wind howled and the rain thrashed down on them.

Then, with the suddenness that comes from the air, the conditions grew better.

The clouds grew thinner, and the rain stopped its torrential downfall. Ahead of them they could see the misty whiteness that told them they were coming through the storm centre. All three of them smiled, from sheer relief.

"That's another spot of bother over," chuckled Tim Allen. "If we get one of those over the Pond, though, we'll know all about it!"

James Lacre chuckled. Peter realised that Tim meant the Atlantic when he spoke of the "Pond," and he more than agreed that they would be in trouble. On the other hand, they had fought a terrible sea-storm over the Pacific, and there was no reason to believe they would not get through safely.

James Lacre spoke of the thing that quickly became uppermost in their minds.

"So we haven't seen Ricardo," he said.

"If he's about," grunted Tim Allen, serious in a moment, "he'll be waiting now. He couldn't have done a thing in the storm."

"That's true enough," admitted James Lacre.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the sun, breaking through the clouds, shone on something that was less than a mile in front of them. The "something" was an aeroplane—painted yellow.

The *Granada!*

CHAPTER XXI

A CRASH TO DEATH

"So he's there," said James Lacre.

Despite the fact that they had been prepared for the Spaniard, and although they would have been surprised if he had not appeared, so deeply were they convinced of the plot to stop them from overtaking Haufman in his new 'plane, the sight of the yellow biplane was something of a shock.

Peter sat very still, with one gun in his hand.

A mile separated them, and it was an act of Providence, it seemed, to enable them to manœuvre before he sighted them.

The *Pioneer*, of course, being blue, was more difficult to see against the background of clouds, while the *Granada* was shown up in relief by the sun and the bright sky. The elements had been on the side of the Englishmen, giving them some slight advantage to counter the deadly weapon that Ricardo carried.

As soon as he sighted the 'plane, and actually as he was speaking, James Lacre climbed steeply.

His object was to get above the biplane, and thus be able to get the first shot in. It was the only thing to do. They had to rely

on their ability as pilots to counteract the other's tremendous advantage. Would the effort succeed?

Peter's heart was in his mouth as the monoplane climbed. But not for a fraction of a second did it hesitate. The engines behaved perfectly.

Up—up—up!

They saw Ricardo had sighted them, for the yellow biplane began to climb, too, the sun still shining on its yellow sides and wings. They could hear the roar of its engine now. Less than a quarter of a mile separated them.

They raced upwards, both machines going all out. Whoever reached the highest point before they were within firing distance might cripple the other.

There was no doubt, now, that Ricardo meant business, otherwise he would not have climbed as he was doing. It was a breathless minute in which all the sensations of a life-time were crowded. From a race round the world, it grew now, to a greater race—a race for life!

The seconds dragged out.

The *Pioneer* rose like a bird, but soon it was seen that the biplane was able to climb more steeply. Despite the monoplane's start, the Spaniard was almost level, now, at a distance of two hundred yards.

"We can't do it!" gasped Tim Allen.

James Lacre shook his head, and at the same time altered his tactics.

One moment the monoplane was climbing. The next it looped and the world seemed to whirl round and round.

Peter hung on grimly to his seat. He didn't see how the others fared, for the blood rushed to his head, deafening and blinding him. But after a few seconds that terrible downwards rush was over. The monoplane straightened out. Peter, looking above, saw the *Granada* was a thousand feet above them.

It had been a marvellous piece of flying—and it had saved their lives. But for how long would they feel the benefit?

The Spaniard, above them, was dropping fast. James Lacre bellowed:

"Fasten your belts!"

The others obeyed, quickly. Now they knew Lacre was going to make this a battle of craftmanship rather than bullets. He was going to do all he could to shake off the biplane, or else get into a position that would prevent the other from using his gun.

A grim, tense battle, high in the heaven, with no one to witness. A fight for life.

The biplane was swooping down, now. It was less than two hundred feet away when Lacre looped again. This time they were held by the belts, and were in no danger of crashing against the walls of the cabin.

They had a four hundred feet advantage now, and the biplane, clumsier in the loop although with better climbing powers, was well behind them. James Lacre opened the throttle full out and raced ahead. He gained a few hundred feet, but the biplane stopped trying tricks and came straight on. Although its average speed was not as high as the *Pioneer's* it was capable

of two hundred and fifty miles an hour, in a short burst.

All out, it raced after its victim.

This time, Peter thought, they would get within shooting distance. He heard his uncle snap:

"Windows open, Peter."

And he knew that James Lacre thought the same.

Peter opened the window, and sat there grimly, with his gun in his hand. It was almost impossible to say what he saw. He realised the biplane flashed by, a streak of vivid yellow, and then for the second time during the flight, machine-gun bullets rattled into the *Pioneer!*

But this time James Lacre swerved. The bullets pecked at the wings and the fuselage, but did very little damage. Peter took his chance as the biplane roared by, and fired three times in quick succession. He didn't know whether any of his shots had taken effect. He did know that there would be another breathing space, perhaps for thirty seconds.

He re-loaded his gun, and sat waiting. Tim Allen came now, and knelt by the other window. Their backs were touching, but they were hardly conscious of each other.

All that mattered was to get the Spaniard down.

It was life and death. They had to kill or be killed. And they realised, despite the heat of the battle, and the fact that they had so far escaped serious damage, that the odds were against them.

The thing that put them on the edge of disaster came quickly, with a suddenness that seemed to stun Peter.

The biplane swooped again. The machine-gun rattled out. This time it was on the far side—Tim's side.

Peter heard a gasp and a grunt. He felt something press hard against his back, but he hardly knew what it was. Then he realised, with a thudding heart, that Tim Allen was wounded!

He squeezed round, and saw the truth.

There was blood on Tim's chest, and blood on his hand. But his lips were twisted into a grim smile.

"I'm all right—young 'un."

All right! He was wounded in at least two places. Peter hardly knew how to move fast enough, in order to give his friend more room.

Then it was that the second disaster came.

Peter heard a cry from behind him. From James Lacre!

He looked round, and his heart almost stopped beating. For his uncle's right hand was a mass of blood. He had been winged!

Two casualties! Two men injured, and unable to fight. And the *Granada's* crew, as far as Peter knew, was unhurt.

But Peter had very little time to think about the Spaniard. He realised the seriousness of the *Pioneer's* plight, now. Apart from the threat of the machine-gun, which was still there, the monoplane was in the air with two

of its pilots so badly wounded that they would not be able to use the controls!

It seemed a long time from the moment he saw his uncle's wounded hand, and Tim Allen's blood-stained chest, to the time when he realised the full import of this disaster. Actually, however, it was a matter of a few seconds only.

Whatever happened, he had to get to the controls!

Unless he did, the monoplane would drop, helplessly, to the ground. James Lacre had pushed the stick into position, and for a few minutes they would be all right. But it would only be for a few minutes.

He had just time to open the first-aid box, and drop the material close to Tim Allen's hand. Then he climbed over the body of his friend, and fell into the pilot's seat, behind his uncle.

James Lacre's voice was thick with pain.

"Got 'em, Peter?"

"I'm all right," said Peter.

"Land as soon as you can," grunted his uncle. "Don't try any tricks."

It was the only thing to do. There was no question about it and, deeply though it grieved Peter, he sent the nose of the monoplane pointing towards the ground. He felt sick. The others were hurt, perhaps more badly than it appeared—and they were out of the race.

Never before had he despaired, but now he believed the chance was non-existent. Forced by the devilry of Ricardo, the *Pioneer* would have to abandon the race. There was no chance

at all of catching Graffhein and Haufman up, now.

And all the time there was the danger from above.

Ricardo would not allow them to land safely, as they had done before. He would be after them, spilling those vicious lead bullets into the machine, hoping to send them crashing in flames to the ground. He would not leave his work half finished. Devil's work, it was, and the servant of the devil would see that he carried it out properly, this time.

At the controls alone, Peter had little time to look about him, but he did turn his head once, to see the yellow streak of the *Granada* less than a hundred feet behind.

The yellow flames of the machine-gun were spouting out, although the bullets were falling short. But it was obvious Ricardo meant to fly alongside them, and send that hail of bullets to complete the havoc he had started.

Grim-lipped, Peter went downwards. The ground seemed to rise up. A thousand feet—eight hundred—six hundred——

The countryside was just a desert waste. No buildings were in sight. It was a desolate mid-American plain, and even if they were able to land there was little or no chance of rescue. With all three of them whole in body, there might have been a chance; but one lad and two wounded men in a desolate plain like this were helpless.

For the first time in his life Peter Grey knew despair.

Every second he expected to see the shadow of the biplane and to feel the bite of bullets. He hardly realised that two minutes had passed, and that the *Granada* should have been level with the monoplane a full minute before. He hardly allowed himself to think of anything but the desperate attempt to land safely.

The waste stretched out beneath him, only four hundred feet away. One thing was on his side. There would be no difficulty in making a landing. A hundred 'planes could have gone down there, without risking a bad run.

But the Granada still hadn't come.

Now Peter was forced to realise the significance of that fact. He had waited so long, expecting the bullets every second. At first he had believed his own anxiety had made the seconds drag out, but now he told by the watch in front of him that he had been four minutes in the air, since he had last looked at the biplane.

He turned his head again.

There are some things in life that it is almost impossible to describe. That moment was the one in Peter's life that above all others, would remain clear. He would never forget the astonishing sight that met his eyes.

For the *Granada* was five hundred feet away, engaged in desperate battle with two other machines!

It was not an hallucination; it was true. Peter could see the two machines, painted grey, he could see the fire spurting from the guns

they carried, and he could see the smaller biplane twisting this way and that in a desperate effort to avoid the retribution that had come to it.

Peter did not have time to think who the newcomers were. There was hardly time for anything. Wide-eyed, red-faced, he stopped the descent and flew straight for a while, shouting as he did so:

"Look behind, Uncle. Tim!"

James Lacre and Tim Allen had been doing their best to patch up their wounds. Lacre had actually received a bullet in his right hand, which was useless, but it was not otherwise hurt. Tim Allen, however, had taken two bullets in the chest and one in the shoulder. They could not possibly tell how badly he was hurt. Certainly he was suffering great pain, for his boyish face was twisted in the effort to keep from crying out.

But at Peter's cry, both pilots looked up.

What they saw startled them as much as it had startled Peter Grey.

The lad turned the machine, so that they could watch the amazing battle without turning their heads. It was the first time Peter had ever seen a real fight in the air. The affair between Clive and Ricardo, a few days before, was nothing compared with this.

The *Granada* was in full flight, now, and the others were after it, like greyhounds. All three biplanes were firing fast, and yellow spurts of flame came from their sides in unceasing flow. The men in the *Pioneer* could hear nothing,

but they needed no evidence of their ears; the eyes were enough.

It seemed impossible that aeroplanes could live through that holocaust, but for two terrific minutes all three fired ceaselessly. Whatever they thought of Ricardo, they were forced into admiration by the fight he made.

But this time the odds were against him.

The grey biplanes were fighting machines, and they had a bigger turn of speed, as well as being equipped with all the modern means of warfare in the air. They kept after their man remorselessly. No quarter would be given.

Now the *Granada* was limping.

Not a word was said in the cabin as the men watched, spellbound. Lacre and Allen forgot their wounds. They were carried away by the spectacle, by that battle between the yellow biplane that flitted through the air like a gigantic dragon-fly, and the two hawk-like fighters.

The *Granada* was going down.

There was no doubt about it, and in his own mind Peter expected the others to cease their efforts. But they did not. They were absolutely ruthless, and their guns were still spitting fire and death as they neared the ground.

The *Pioneer* was a thousand feet up now, and the others were no more than five hundred from the ground.

Suddenly smoke burst from the *Granada*.

It had hardly started before flame replaced it. In a split second the spell-bound airmen

saw the fire catch hold, increasing with every moment. Soon there was no sight of the biplane itself. All they could see was a roaring, red and yellow mass, burning, burning——

Then the *Granada* hit the ground.

There was a terrific flash of fire that seemed to spread out over a vast area. That was all they saw. As the seconds flew the fire grew larger and larger. Then it seemed to reach its limit. For a few minutes it was about the same size; then smoke began to come, instead of flames, and the fire lessened.

Not until then did anyone in the monoplane speak.

It was Tim Allen who broke the strained silence, despite his wound. His face was twisted in a smile that, but for the pain he was feeling, would have been cheerful and typical.

"Well," he gasped, "we've had something for our money. Somebody loves us, lads!"

"They do, indeed!" muttered James Lacre, who looked as if he had seen something in a dream. "It doesn't seem possible. You know what those 'planes are, Tim?"

"Sure and I do," said Tim Allen. "They're American fighting biplanes—and modern ones at that."

Peter heard him, and although he had half-guessed, the revelation seemed to be like a physical shock.

"You're—sure?" he asked, and his voice trembled.

"As sure as I'm here," said Tim Allen.

Peter's mind was in a whirl, and he coasted

along, and watched the two biplanes climb a little, until they were on a level with the *Pioneer*. What had happened to cause this thing? How had the fighters reached this spot? It seemed impossible that they were really rescued——

But it was true.

Suddenly something else happened to prevent Peter from thinking about the spectacle. His uncle snapped:

"Signal them to land, Peter. Tim's out."

"Out?" Peter gasped the word involuntarily, and looked round. To his dismay, he saw Tim Allen half leaning against the spare seat, his head lolling back, his face a pasty white. He was unconscious.

The American 'planes were close at hand, now. Peter signalled to them, and they replied that they understood. Soon all the 'planes were rushing downwards. Again the air was filled with the thunder of their engines.

But this time the only fear Peter felt was for his friend. For a few minutes at least he had forgotten the race.

CHAPTER XXII

ONWARDS!

THE American machines landed first, and Peter saw two youthful-looking men climb out, both of them dressed in American Air Force uniforms, and both of them wearing helmet and goggles. They hurried up to the *Pioneer* as it came to a standstill, and as Peter opened the door one of them said anxiously:

"Any damage?"

"One hurt," said Peter.

The Americans tightened their lips, and without further ado began to help James Lacre get the unconscious body of the pilot out. Tim looked ghastly. But James Lacre said reassuringly:

"I don't think it's touched any vital spot, thank heavens. Can you look after him? Get him to hospital?"

The taller of the two American pilots answered.

"Surely," he said, and then he glanced at Lacre's hand. "But you're in a nasty way, Mr. Lacre."

Peter's uncle smiled a little grimly.

"I'll get you to dress it for me, if you will," he said. "And while you're working you might —well, let's know all about it."

The others chuckled, although there was very little humour in their expressions. One of them hurried back to his own machine, collected a first aid box, and hurried back. They were soon busy at James Lacre's hand, and Tim Allen's chest. The taller man maintained his role of spokesman.

"I don't know a great deal," he said, "but we had the order to keep well behind you, and watch for trouble with a yellow biplane. We didn't really expect trouble," he added, with a little laugh. "Certainly we didn't think we'd find anything like this."

"But who gave the order?" asked James Lacre.

"No idea," said the other pilot. "I know one thing, Mr. Lacre—I'm darned sorry that we were so late. That bank of clouds, and the storm, beat us. We lost our bearings a little, and when we came into the open the fight was on."

James Lacre nodded, thoughtfully. Afterwards he learned that the Flight officials had made a secret request that the *Pioneer* and the other machines be watched. But the public never learned the truth.

"I suppose you know who you brought down," he said.

The tall pilot nodded, and glanced in the direction of the mass of twisted, white-hot metal, that was all that was left of the *Granada* and its crew.

"The Spaniard," he said. "Lord, but what a swine! I saw he had a machine-gun, and that

finished him. If he'd had ordinary automatics I might have let him off lightly. But——"

He broke off, and smiled into Lacre's face. "Well, sir. Going on?"

James Lacre turned, with a half smile, to his nephew.

"Feel like carrying on, Peter? Tim will be all right—these good fellows will get him to a hospital."

"He'll be all tucked up and happy before you're in sight of New York," said the American.

Peter's eyes glistened. Once again a miracle had saved them. The flight wasn't over. The motto was: *Onwards!*

His uncle needed no answer more than the expression on his face. They bade good-bye to the American pilots, thanking them again for the way they had come to the rescue. Then the *Pioneer* went up again, sent off this time by the hearty cheers of two young and enthusiastic men of the American Air Force.

For a few minutes while they went up, there was silence in the cabin. It seemed strange without Tim Allen, but it was a comforting thought that he was not badly hurt.

"You're sure he's all right?" Peter asked at last.

He was at the controls, of course. James Lacre was little or no use for piloting, with his right hand bandaged and stiff. But for a little while Peter didn't realise the significance of this fact.

"As far as I could see," said his uncle, "Tim had a couple of holes fairly high up in his

chest—too high and too far to the right for his lungs or his heart. I should be very surprised if he isn't up and about again in a few weeks."

"Thank heaven for that!" exclaimed Peter.

His uncle nodded, and then looked at him frankly:

"You know what you're up against, young 'un, don't you?"

Peter frowned a little.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"Well," said James Lacre, smiling twistedly, "if you want to go on with this flight you'll have to do all the work yourself. I can give you a spell now and again, but not for long. I'm practically useless. You're the only able pilot on board, Peter."

For the first time Peter realised that to the full.

He was silent for a minute. Oddly enough, the thing had come to him as a surprise, although if his mind had not been so full of other things he would have realised it at once.

James Lacre stared at the old-young face of his nephew.

Peter's well-cut lips tightened, and his eyes narrowed. He looked at least ten years older than he was, and his voice was that of a man too. Quietly:

"I want to go on," he said.

James Lacre nodded, and smiled.

"I thought you would," he said quietly. "Good man, Peter."

In all the years that followed, Peter Grey put those few words as the finest that had ever rung in his ears. They were quiet and

they seemed to mean so little. But they were worth more than all the hero-worship that the flight had caused, they were of more value to him than anything else.

He smiled. And then he set his mind on one thing, and one thing only.

The *Pioneer* was still in the race. If it was humanly possible, he was going to win it.

That night America repeated its efforts of the previous day. Now they were nearer the East coast, the states were smaller, and more populated. It was rare that they were not within sight of some big township, and all along the route there was a blaze of light, so that they would not lose their way.

Radio calls came frequently, moreover, with messages of goodwill. The *Pioneer* had won the sympathy of all America—and for that matter of all the world—although whether there was any news abroad of the fight that had just finished, neither Peter nor his uncle knew.

Through the darkness, looking down on the myriads of twinkling lights below, Peter piloted that wonderful monoplane, and not once did the engines give any trouble, or any sign of trouble. Incredible though it seemed, they were within a hundred miles of New York, seventeen hours after leaving San Francisco.

Seventeen hours!

It seemed years since the fight, years since Tim Allen had been carried out of the monoplane.

They did not land actually in New York, of course. That great city, built on islands, had no air-park. But a few miles outside a

tremendous crowd was waiting for them, as at nine o'clock that night, they 'planed down, and made a landing that brought a smile of admiration to James Lacre's lips.

As in San Francisco, the greeting was well-organized, but this time there was no official welcome. The World Flight Official appreciated that they would want no fuss.

The first thing they asked, as they walked away from the *Pioneer* after giving the usual request for oiling and inspection, was the position of the other aeroplanes. Their informant was Gregson, a short, rather fat American, with a harder nasal drawl than that of the man on the other side of the continent.

"Haufman left seven hours ago," he said. "He had a good flight, but was pushed out of his course a bit by the storm."

"Seven hours," muttered Peter, to himself.

"And Graffhein?" asked his uncle.

"Three hours ago," said Gregson.

The information was even better than they could have normally expected. Only seven hours separated them from the leading 'plane. But for the fight with Ricardo another hour could have been cut off this lead.

Graffhein, too, was catching up on the Austrian. What a fight it was!

"We'll be off in half an hour," said James Lacre, quietly. "Suit you, Peter?"

"The sooner the better," said the lad, quietly.

"No use asking you to drop out?" said Gregson, with an eye on Lacre's bandaged hand. "We've heard all about the affair, Mr. Lacre.

A message came through—Allen's comfortable, by the way."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed James Lacre. Then with a smile, "No, I'm afraid you can't persuade us, Mr. Gregson. We're too close to their heels to give up now."

The fat man had obviously expected the answer. He smiled and nodded, and hurried them into a small room, where they had a hasty meal, and the older man's hand was re-dressed, this time by a doctor on the spot. In half an hour and five minutes, Peter Grey and James Lacre were at their seats in the *Pioneer*. All about them were the surging crowds, the roaring of enthusiastic voices, shouts of good-will. No one knew exactly what had happened, but they did know that the *Pioneer* had been through an ordeal, that one of its pilots was badly hurt, and in hospital, and that it was going on with a seventeen-year-old lad at the controls, and a comparatively helpless man with him.

Again the performance, the courage of the men of the monoplane, appealed to the imagination of this warm-hearted country. No aeroplane had ever left the air-field near New York to the accompaniment of such a tremendous send-off.

As Peter heard it, droning into the cabin, he smiled a little. But he did not smile for long. He realised what was expected of him. He had to pilot the monoplane across three thousand miles of water, and, to stand a chance of getting home first, he had to average two hundred miles an hour all the way.

Was there a chance?

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST HOP

ONE thing only had been fair to the *Pioneer* from the start of this tremendous race—and that was the weather. It had been equally good to the other competitors, of course. A fine weather cycle had followed them round the world. Small—or comparatively small—storms as they had flown through could not be avoided altogether, of course. But on the whole the conditions had been exceptionally good.

Peter knew that if he was to succeed in this great race against time, the weather would have to hold.

The forecasts were good, and there was every chance of getting back to England without encountering anything more than a stiff wind. On the other hand, unexpected changes came frequently, and he could not be sure of anything.

He was feeling desperately tired, after the first hour's flight. He had been at the controls since six o'clock that morning, without a wink of sleep. His biggest fear was that he would find himself unable to keep awake.

"Let me take her for an hour," said James Lacre suddenly. "It's set fair, Peter. I could fly her blind-fold for an hour, and with my

hands tied behind my back. Your job'll come later."

It was sound advice, and although Peter realised there was a possibility of his uncle's hand getting worse, he decided to take the spell. He sat in the other pilot's seat, however, and not in the rest seat. In a few minutes he was fast asleep.

It was two hours later, at half-past eleven, when his uncle roused him.

"Sorry," said James Lacre, with a little smile, "but I can't manage it much longer, young 'un. Have a sup of tea or coffee, and take over."

Peter drank from the invaluable thermos flask, and carried on. It was pitch dark now, although once or twice they saw the lights of a ship beneath them. The *Pioneer* did not flag. Its engines were going perfectly, and it seemed that they would last out. Their trouble had come early in the flight.

The hours passed.

The monotony of night flying was not so pronounced, this time. Fifteen hours, after all, was not a terribly long spell—although in more normal circumstances it would have been long enough—and in fact it was essential, if possible, to make the crossing in under the fifteen hours.

Every nerve in Peter's body was concentrated on the flight. He thought of nothing else but the droning of the great engines. Several times steamers and liners passing beneath them sent up great rockets, but Peter hardly saw them.

Onwards—onwards——

Unless they had news by wireless, they would not be able to tell how they were faring in the race. It depended a great deal on luck, of course. The slightest trouble with the engines of either the *Deutschland* or the *Haufman* would be a big advantage for the crippled crew of the *Pioneer*. But more important than luck, was their accuracy in keeping a straight course.

If the weather did remain fair, Peter knew he could do it. The instruments he had were calculated to such perfection that it was almost impossible to fail to keep to the carefully noted route they were to follow. But if wind rose, and pushed them out of their course, they would lose precious hours.

No wind came.

After seven hours' flying, they had covered a little more than fourteen hundred miles—very nearly half way. For the next two hours, until half-past six—they maintained the same speed.

Then dawn came again.

Peter welcomed it. Now he could see.

As the minutes passed, he grew more and more excited. Forgotten was everything, now, but the race. How far ahead were the others? Was it possible they could get their nose in front?

James Lacre, unable to sleep and just as susceptible to a rising excitement as Peter, kept the ear-phones on. Now and again snatches of music were heard, but it was not until half

past nine, twelve hours out of New York, that they heard the first news of the flight.

It was a message broadcast from England!

England was only six hundred miles ahead. Six hundred miles! In two hours they would sight the coast of Ireland. In three, if their luck held, they would be back on the field at Lympne, after seven days of marvellous adventure.

Only seven days, to encircle the world!

It was by far the greatest achievement of modern air-craft. It was perhaps the most significant development since Blériot had flown the English channel.

But Graffhein and Haufman were still ahead.

It was as Peter was thinking of this, for the hundredth time, that the message came. It was directed to all shipping and craft off the coasts of Ireland and England. It ran:

> "All craft and coast stations are asked to keep a sharp look out for the *Haufman* and the *Deutschland*, both aeroplanes are reported to be within a few hundred miles of the Irish coast."

Within a few hundred miles!

The same could be said of the *Pioneer*. Neither of the other machines had reached land. Their lead had been cut down again and again. Now perhaps only half an hour separated them.

"Keep it up, Peter," said James Lacre, quietly.

Peter nodded. He was too excited to speak, almost too excited to think. All that went through his mind was the fact that they were within reach of the others, and of the end of their journey. They might even pass the other 'planes——

The same message came from the English station at quarter of an hour intervals. After an hour, no sign had been seen of the other machines, and the *Pioneer* was still racing onwards, like a meteor through the clear sky. They were only two hundred miles away from Ireland now, and every minute took them three miles nearer.

Now they saw shipping craft more frequently.

Twice they passed great liners, going in different directions, and they could see the people on the decks, waving to them. But Peter did not fly low, did not try to respond. Every second was precious.

Half an hour passed.

Then the message came through the ether that sent Peter's heart pounding against his ribs.

> "The *Haufman* has been sighted off the Irish coast. The *Deutschland* is believed less than ten minutes behind."

So there was nothing in it. Less than fifty miles separated the three aeroplanes that had raced for twenty-five thousand miles and more. It was a terrific finish.

But excited as he grew, Peter kept his mind on the controls. The slightest miscalculation

here, and he would ruin the advantage he had gained.

Ahead of them, fourteen hours out of New York, they saw a faint, grey haze. They could not be sure at first whether it was land, but both of them believed it was. They laughed excitedly.

Then came the finest sound they could have heard.

The ether spoke again, and the first words were:

"The *Pioneer* has been sighted off the Irish coast. The *Haufman* is now over southern Ireland, with the *Deutschland* five minutes behind."

The message was longer than that, of course, and the announcer's voice, filled with excitement he could not repress, showed the effect of this amazing finish of the greatest race in the history of the world.

Now Peter clenched his teeth, and let the throttle out, his heart throbbing, a noise like thunder in his ears. He said no word, and James Lacre was just as silent. Both of them stared ahead, only taking their eyes off the horizon to look at the instruments. And at last the great moment came when the hungry waters of the Atlantic were no longer beneath them, but the green fields of Ireland were!

Ireland!

Now they were only two hundred miles from home. Now messages were coming across the ether, telling of the position of all three aero-

planes. The messages came at frequent intervals, and Peter realised that all the people of the world were listening to the reports, feeling something of the thrill of that stupendous race. Nothing could have been more fitting than this close finish.

Then came England!

They were over North Cornwall when James Lacre, using the glasses, looked ahead and saw a speck in the distance that was certainly another 'plane. Whether it was one of the fliers he didn't know, but he kept his eyes glued to the glasses as they grew nearer.

Suddenly he burst out:

"It's Graffhein, Peter!"

The words echoed in Peter's mind. It seemed almost impossible, but it was true. The *Deutschland* was just ahead of them, and they were overtaking it! They saw the black outlines of the German 'plane, and they realised it was going all out. But the *Pioneer* was slightly faster. As the seconds passed they overhauled it, almost inch by inch.

At last they were flying level!

And even then, as Peter spared a glance in the direction of the *Deutschland*, he could just see Graffhein's face, and that the German was grinning. Graffhein could take a defeat.

He was behind them!

Now for the *Haufman!*

In the other hops the chances of striking other fliers had been comparatively small, but now they knew they would almost certainly pass the *Haufman*—providing it did not reach

the landing field ahead of them. As the minutes flew, Peter searched the sky for a sign of the Austrian 'plane, but as they neared London he had not seen it.

They were flying low now, no more than a thousand feet above the land. Below them the streets of the towns over which they passed were filled with waving, shouting people. Ahead of them was Lympne——

And the Austrian.

Could they overtake him? Was it possible that they would get home first, despite all that had happened?

They were over Surrey. Soon they would be flying across Kent—the Garden of England. Lympne was only thirty miles away. Thirty miles——

"He's there!" snapped James Lacre, suddenly.

His eyes were glued to his glasses. Peter glanced at his lean face, and saw that his mouth was working with his excitement. Then James Lacre snatched the glasses from his eyes, and spun round, his face gleaming.

"We've got him, Peter! That's him, in front!"

And Peter, staring with eyes that seemed to be dropping out of his head, saw the slanting rays of the winter sun striking the red biplane ahead of them—the *Haufman*. It was flying low, but it was going all out.

Twenty miles left. The *Haufman* was a quarter of a mile ahead. Less than five hundred yards.

Foot by foot the *Pioneer* crept up. Peter felt the excitement in his heart and mind. He was incapable of speech, and he worked the controls like an automaton. Was the *Haufman* nearer? Was he gaining?

The seconds flew. Peter's breath was coming in short gasps, and for a while he was afraid they would lose. But as he heard his uncle muttering between clenched teeth, he realised that the *Pioneer* was actually gaining.

Ten miles from Lympne, when they could see the waters of the English Channel ahead of them, although they could not pick out the air-field itself, the *Haufman* was only a hundred yards ahead. They could see the men in the 'plane, and they guessed the others were feeling just as madly excited, just as desperately anxious, as they were themselves.

The distance grew less.

Eighty yards—seventy—sixty——

Above Kent the two aeroplanes flew. Below them men and women were going half-mad with excitement. Throughout the world millions of people were listening to the wireless messages that were being relayed, and jumping with the thrill of this great race. Few of them knew that the *Haufman* was suspected of a part in the attempts to ruin the *Pioneer* and its crew. To the world this was the end of a race between two sportsmen—or two sets of sportsmen.

Fifty yards—forty—thirty——

They could see the air-field now, and the throngs of people round it, like little ants. They could see the streamers to guide them,

They could just see arms waving, and flags whirled madly. But all the time their eyes were glued on the red machine ahead of them.

Twenty yards—ten!

It seemed from below that the two machines were touching each other, but actually the *Pioneer* was flying lower than the *Haufman*, and forty yards to its right. The gap between them closed. Peter himself was sitting at the controls, and when he looked to his left he could see into the cabin of the *Haufman*. Its occupants were staring at him, except the pilot.

Neck and neck——

Five yards——

Peter hardly knew how it happened. Afterwards he could never remember seeing anything. What really happened, he said, was that he saw nothing. For the *Haufman* dropped out of his sight as James Lacre muttered tensely:

"Make it, Peter. Land!"

Down—down—down——

People were cheering like mad, sober officials were red-faced with shouting, the announcer's voice on the radio seemed to jump up and down. The *Pioneer* was leading——

The ground rose up. It was less than fifty feet away—thirty feet—ten——

Then the wheels of the monoplane touched the ground, and Peter applied the brakes, slowly, bringing it to a stop twenty yards from the spot where they had taken off, a week before.

The Pioneer had won!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FAME OF PETER GREY

So they were back in England, in their native country! After those seven crowded days of peril and adventure, they were back, safe, if not unharmed. Peter Grey, in fact, was the only member of the intrepid crew who had set out in the race, to reach England without a wound of some kind. But it was almost impossible to think of these things as they climbed stiffly out of the *Pioneer*, and heard the thunderous roars of the people gathered there. Thousands upon thousands shouted themselves hoarse.

And then the shouts developed into something else.

Even while the officials were crowding round the fliers, shaking their hands, patting their backs, laughing with excitement all the time, there was rhythm in the cries from the great gathering of English people who had come to welcome their heroes home. It echoed above the noise of the *Haufman's* engine, as the Austrian 'plane descended. For a few seconds Peter could not believe it was really happening.

But it was!

The cry came, again and again: "*We—want—Peter—Grey! We—want—Peter—Grey!*"

And, tired as he was, half dead with sleep, now that the great moment was over, Peter Grey was hoisted on the backs of half a dozen enthusiastic officials, and James Lacre was carried shoulder high as well. Cameras were clicking, and then Peter came face to face, for the first time in his life, with a microphone.

A smiling man was asking him quietly to speak, but Peter felt that he could not open his mouth. He was more scared of the microphone than he had been of anything he had met in the flight round the world! He might not have plucked up courage to say anything, if he had not seen his uncle's face, smiling encouragement. So he took a deep breath.

"It—it's good to be back home," he said, "and I'm proud to have helped to win. But really my uncle did most of it. I—well"—Peter went redder than ever, but just managed to stutter—"well, thanks, everybody, for your welcome. Flying's just great, and we had wonderful weather all the way."

As he stopped, there was a tremendous roar from the crowd. But even then Peter didn't realise quite what it all meant. He felt done in, now, and he could hardly move his legs across the air-field. He wasn't even aware that the crew of the *Haufman*, who had been given almost as big a welcome as the *Pioneer's*, had just pushed through the officials, and refused to say anything. They were terribly bad losers, but in the excitement no one realised it fully.

The thing was like a dream. People passed in front of Peter, laughing, smiling, calling his

name, but he wanted to do nothing now, but sleep. After all, he'd taken part in the flight and it was over. This welcome really wasn't part of it, wonderful though it was.

At last he was alone, with his uncle, in the room at the Lympne hotel where they had stayed before the flight had started.

"Well, young 'un," said James Lacre, "you've done wonders. We couldn't have managed it, but for you."

"I did my best," said Peter, with a tremendous yawn.

"And a wonderful best it was," said his uncle. "But tumble in, Peter. You'll want a good sleep."

Peter slept the clock round, and he did not wake up until he heard his uncle moving about the room. James Lacre was carrying tea and biscuits, on a tray. They shared them, and then Lacre said a little gravely:

"We'd better get this finished first, Peter. We've had a confidential message from Shanghai saying that the Chinaman you stopped from murdering us was paid by an Austrian—and we know it's an associate of Haufman's. Haufman has been before the Flight Committee, and told that he is suspected of a part in Ricardo's efforts to bring us down. As Ricardo is dead, however, it is possible for the scandal never to leak out. Haufman has resigned his position as second in the race—disqualified for a foul—and he is to be forced to say there was a serious technical fault with his new machine. So he will benefit nothing from his

efforts, Ricardo has paid for his sins. So—it's over."

Peter nodded, and smiled. He was very glad there would be no scandal.

Two hours later he went downstairs in the hotel, and looked for the first time that morning at the newspapers. They were filled with photographs of himself, James Lacre and the *Pioneer*. The headlines carried his name in huge letters. There was no doubt but that Peter Grey, the boy-pilot, was a national hero.

He felt tremendously thrilled, but all the same he did not look forward to the publicity. Even now, a crowd of reporters and "fans" were waiting in the hotel, ready to pounce on him as soon as he showed his face.

"Well, Peter," said his uncle. "What do you think of it?"

"It's wonderful," said Peter. "But I'd like to go somewhere quietly for a few weeks, until all the excitement's died down."

"That's just what I wanted you to say," said the other, smiling. "You can do what you like now, you know. You've a third share in that fifty-thousand pounds."

Peter whistled. He had forgotten the prize!

"Well," he said, "you'll come with me, won't you?"

"This is my idea," said James Lacre. "We'll have a fortnight in the country, and then go by sea, this time, to America, and bring Tim back. We've had a message, by the way—he's getting on famously. Like the scheme?"

"It's great!" said Peter enthusiastically.

"After that," said James Lacre, "we'll start work on another machine that will do better even than the *Pioneer*. We've got a lot of work ahead of us, young 'un."

"The more the better!" said Peter Grey, his eyes shining.

Everything went according to plan, and there remains only one thing more to relate about the Great World Flight. Two months after the *Pioneer* had returned to England, Tim Allen was brought back, sound in wind and limb again.

There was a great gathering, a few days later, at the Pilots' Club. Peter Grey was the guest of honour, with his uncle and Tim next to him. Opposite them at their table were the German pilots, with Graffhein, smiling and youthful as ever, in the middle. It was a gloriously happy time for Peter Grey.

But the supreme moment came at the end of the dinner. The Chairman, a bearded, grey-haired man who had been one of the first men in the world to fly at all, said quietly as he smiled at Peter Grey.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you will be delighted to hear, I know, that Peter Grey has been awarded the medal for the year's best flight, by the International Air Committee. The toast is:

"*Peter Grey!*"

And then, after Peter had stammered a short reply, overwhelmed by this news, the gathering, that comprised the greatest airmen

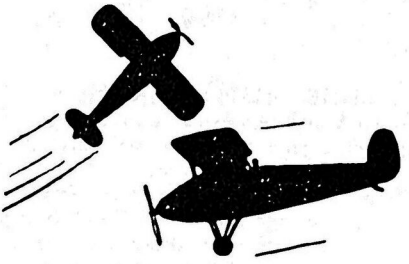
in England, and, indeed, the world, rose to their feet and let their voices go.

They sang:

"For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow, he's a jolly good fe-elLOW! *And so—say all—of us!*"

THE END

SAMPSON LOW'S



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The modern boy and his sister crave for reading that is modern, exciting and amusing. They want something that will satisfy their imagination and make them say, "Gee, I wish I'd been there!" In this list there is a wonderfully wide choice of adventure and school stories, and for the boy—or girl, who prefers fact to fiction there is the famous "Romance" Series and the equally excellent "Splendid" Series. The younger children have not been forgotten, for there are charming Rupert Stories, and a number of fine Fairy Books.

100 SOUTHWARK ST. LONDON

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THE AIR TREASURE HUNT. Major Maxwell Moody in his giant flying boat flies to South America to find the Inca's treasure, but he comes up against a gang of villains who are only defeated by the pluck of a boy pilot in the expedition.

THE AIR CIRCUS. The Air Circus is an air show whose job is to prove that British planes are the best. There is a gang of spies from another country who stop at nothing to wreck the Circus, but chiefly owing to a young crack pilot the Circus wins through.

PLAYING FOR THE SCHOOL. Brookwood School was in a bad way, but the new games master and a new boy, Monty Carlin, revolutionise the school in a way that is full of thrills and fun.

ANTON LIND

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SIX TOUGH FELLOWS. A foreign boy arrives at Altonbury and causes a terrific feud between the Fourth and Fifth. Suddenly he is kidnapped, rescued—and kidnapped again, and the book ends in a grand adventure when his chums find him and the mystery is cleared up.

SUPER TERM, YOU CHAPS! Into Altonbury bursts the human bombshell, Bob Martin. He is such a nuisance that everybody sits on him; left alone he gets into serious trouble and causes his brother's friends some hectic adventures.

WIN THROUGH, ALTONBURY! After Sports Day at Altonbury five boys decide to spend the summer hols. in a motor launch voyaging round the coast. They find thrills galore and ripping fun as well.

G. GIBBARD JACKSON

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THE AIR PIRATES OF THE CONGO. Two boys, their father and two others set out in a seaplane up the Congo to find a huge treasure of rubies, but they meet the Air Pirates and get into some terrific adventures before they find the rubies.

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AIR SPIES OF THE NORTH SEA. A splendid story of foreign spies in seaplanes outwitted by some schoolboys, whose adventures are really thrilling.

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SPEED-BOAT SPIES. The boys of Cams School are much excited by the visits of a ghost and a mysterious speedboat. How a few of them clear up the mystery is very exciting reading.

SCHOOLBOY SPEED-KINGS. Several boys from a school near Brooklands are involved in the activities of a gang of car-thieves. They bring these to justice but not before going through many thrilling adventures in racing cars.

FLYING SMUGGLERS. Some boys of Swanbury School discover that there are flying smugglers working in the neighbourhood. They try to defeat them, but have a very lively time before they win.

SCHOOLBOY SLEUTHS. Why does the Headmaster go to the deserted tin mine at night? Six boys at Clandon School try to find out, and their adventures make exciting reading.

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●

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